

Kristina Myrvold

# INSIDE THE GURU'S GATE



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RITUAL USES OF TEXTS AMONG  
THE SIKHS IN VARANASI

LUND STUDIES IN  
AFRICAN AND ASIAN RELIGIONS

General Editor  
Tord Olsson

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## PREFACE

My research on the Sikhs in Varanasi took me out on long journeys into the worlds of many different people to whom I will always be greatly indebted. For some years these journeys made me commute between four main stations: the vivid and colorful culture alongside river Ganga at Varanasi; the academic life in the medieval city of Lund; the breezy UCSB campus on the beaches at Santa Barbara; and not the least the cooler and quieter forests at my native place in Värmland. At all these places there will be long lists of people who made me feel at home in their worlds, provided guidance in my academic pursuits, and gave support in my personal life. To my academic friends at these locations I want to quote a few lines by Gregory Schopen (1997) which in some sense recapitulate my own attitude towards scholarly works in general and the present work in particular:

[T]he result that it will produce will necessarily be somewhat tentative. My data can and should be supplemented. My methods may have to be refined. My conclusions and interpretation may have to be modified, and perhaps, in part, rejected. But it should be an interesting discussion.<sup>1</sup>

In India there are many friends to whom I wish to direct my sincere thanks for introducing me to the culture of Varanasi and the Punjab and teaching me the Sikh religion in practice and theory. Firstly I am forever indebted to my numerous friends in the Sikh community. This thesis is about their religious life and would not have come into existence without their warm hospitality and patience. I wish to express my warmest gratitude to Papa ji Sukhdev Singh at Gurubagh Gurdwara and Bhai Jiopal Singh and his loving family at Nichibagh Gurdwara for always providing guidance and support in my work. I also want to direct a special thanks to Dada ji Ganesh Singh and his family as well as to Bhupi and his family for being generous and caring friends. Individual names of other Sikh friends cannot be mentioned here, but instead I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all members of the congregation in Varanasi for generously opening doors to the Guru's house and inviting me in to their private lives. If I have made any misrepresentations of the community or the Sikh religion I can only say I did my best at this stage in life and humbly ask for forgiveness.

In Varanasi, I am greatly indebted to my respected brother Ajay Kumar, or Pinku, who worked as my field assistant for more than three years and has been a constant source for knowledge of local cultures and religions. Pinku

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<sup>1</sup> Schopen 1997:115.

did not merely introduce me to people and institutions, but also taught me how to drive a motorcycle in the busy shopping streets. I also want to direct sincere thanks to the director of the Swedish Study Center, Om Prakash Sharma, for facilitating my stay at the center and providing valuable guidance on the Indian cultures. I need also to extend my thanks to the archivists Ashok Vajpayee at the *Regional Archive* in Varanasi and Muhammed at *Maha Palika* who helped me with documents and translations from Urdu. The travels and stays in India between 1999 and 2004 were supported by grants from *Crafoordska Stiftelsen*, *Knut och Alice Wallenbergs Stiftelse*, *Stiftelsen Anna Nilssons Fond*, *Landshövding Per Westlings Minnesfond* and *The Royal Academy of Letter, History and Antiquities*.

The academic culture in Lund with its rituals and traditions at first astounded me and there are many people to whom I am indebted for making me feel at home in the city and the surroundings of Lund University. Parts of the present work have been debated at the graduate seminars in Indian Religions headed by Prof. Olle Qvarnström. I am indebted to Prof. Qvarnström and other seminar participants, especially Martin Gansten, Sidsel Hansson, Jürgen Offermanns, and Ulla Thoreson, for taking time for discussions and giving valuable comments on early drafts. A special thank you is due to Katarina Plank for collegial support and stimulating cooperation in the work of creating and editing the journal *Chakra – tidskrift för indiska religioner*.

My supervisor Prof. Tord Olsson at the Department of History and Anthropology of Religions has been a constant source of inspiration and guidance. His theoretical explorations and elaborations on the weekly graduate seminars came to shape my research focus and interest in anthropology of religion and ritual studies. The discussions with Prof. Olsson continually make me expand the interpretative frames and horizons. Other past and present seminar participants at the Department of History and Anthropology of Religions to whom I wish to express gratitude for constructive discussions are Stefan Arvidsson, Sten Barnekow, Bo Carlsson, Ask Gasi, Torsten Jansson, Leif Karlsson, Ann Kull, Rickard Lagervall, Lars Steen Larsen, Andreas Lundin, Hege Markussen, Andre Möller, Max Nordin, Arne Nykvist, Heike Peter, Åse Piltz, Catharina Raudvere, Karin Sjögren, Christel Ståhl, Kristina Taylor, Åsa Trulsson, Anna Törngren, Pierre Wiktorin, Frida Mebius-Önnerfors (and the rest unmentioned). I wish to direct a special thanks to Ann-Christine Hornborg for helpful orientations in the field of ritual studies, and to Peter Habbe for clarifying and heating up the discussions on what defines a ritual act.

The doctoral period came to include two longer stays on the other side of the Atlantic, more precisely at the Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara, in the US. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the director of the center, Prof. Gurinder

Singh Mann. He has provided me much needed support and guidance in Sikh studies and his extensive knowledge in the field continues to inspire my work. There are graduate students in Sikh and Punjab Studies who made my two stays at Santa Barbara memorable events. A special thank you is due to Gibb Schreffler for always being a good friend and teacher on Punjabi folk culture. Other students, of whom deserve a special mention, are Rana Ajrawat, Randi Clary, Rahuldeep Singh Gill, Dan Michon, Pawan Rehill, Ami Shah, Gurdit Singh, and John Warneke. My gratitude goes to *The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education* (STINT) for supporting the seven months-long stay at the UCSB in 2002 – 2003, and to the *Fulbright Commission* for making another stay for eight months reality in 2006.

Over the years my home county Värmland has been a place of return, both for academic pursuits and personal retreats. At Karlstad University I would like to thank Prof. Kjell Härenstam and Prof. Marc Katz for being mentors who encouraged me to continue with graduate studies on the Sikh religion and gave opportunities, in India and Sweden, to valuable teaching experiences. I am also indebted to Dr. Per-Olof Fjällsby and his wife Inga-Lill who have always been well-wishers and ensured my stays at Ganga Mahal in Varanasi. A large number of undergraduate students at Karlstad University have contributed to the development of ideas and assisted me in the field work. My gratitude goes especially to Brita Ahlenius, Anders Backman, Cecilia Eriksson, and Vesna Huss for being good friends.

Far out on countryside in Värmland, where the miles-long and mysteriously deep forests are framing the small curly fields, lies my native home nearby the Norwegian border. During the course of my work I have returned to this place for grief and for happiness. In between the field works in India two beloved family members passed away and cancer caused the final and too early departure of a dear friend. On one of the trips to India I met a remarkable man with whom I later tied nuptial bonds in the summer greenery of Värmland. In the hovering between sorrow and happiness my family members and especially my parents, Majlise and Kermith Myrvold, have given constant support for which I am forever in debt. Although my journeys in life have taken many different directions they have always made sure that I have a belonging, a loving family, and a native place to which I always can return.

Finally, I want to thank my beloved husband, Harpreet Bajwa, who dramatically changed my life in the middle of this work. His unstinting love and support have made me understand and experience how much more joy it is to share the different journeys in life with a loving life-partner. I love you.

Lund  
October 2007



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# INTRODUCTION

When I first arrived at Varanasi in 1996 for an undergraduate program in religious studies I had plans to write a thesis about perceptions of religious identity among Sikhs residing in the Hindu pilgrimage center. The destination of Varanasi was set by the university program and I had joined it to learn more about the Sikh religion. From the available literature I had monitored up to then, a separate Sikh identity and especially its definition in relation to the Hindu religion seemed to be a topic of high relevance and great controversy among scholars. Contrastingly, my university professor at that time would talk warmly about “cultural inclusion” in the Indian society and “religious interface” in worship and festivals between Hindus, Muslims, and the Sikhs. A contributing factor for choosing the Sikhs at Varanasi was the scholarly tendency to focus on Sikhism in the Punjab and in a “Western” Diaspora, while neglecting all those Sikhs who live outside the heartland of Punjab but still within the national borders of India, that is, in an Indian Diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Of the 19 million people who constitute the Sikh population in India about a quarter resides in the capital of Delhi and other states apart from the Punjab. Uttar Pradesh, the state in which Varanasi is located, holds the seemingly modest number 3.5 percent of the total Sikh population, yet comprises more than half a million individuals.<sup>2</sup>

With a rather vague plan to investigate manifestations of “cultural inclusion” at Varanasi and trace elements that could possibly be relevant to local conceptions and attitudes toward a Sikh identity, I made the first acquaintance with the gurdwaras in the city and began to conduct interviews with Sikh families. One sunny afternoon in the middle of the work, however, the manager of the gurdwara invited me to his office. He requested me to take a seat and share a cup of tea. After a silent moment, he asked what I really wanted to know about the Sikh religion. I tried my best to explain the interest in a Sikh identity, and especially the relationship between the Hindu and Sikh traditions, but noticed that my words did not fall into good grounds. The manager explained the interrelation between the two traditions as a matter of course, since the Sikhs were Hindus from the beginning. Within a few minutes he had in fact judged the problem of my study as irrelevant. When our tea was finished he pointed a finger towards the nearby gurdwara hall and said: “Why don’t you look at the things we actually *do*?”

I should admit the manager’s negative response momentarily caused distress. To have the research study mistrusted or rejected by “informants” is not a pleasant

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<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are Parkash’s (1981) study of the Sikhs in Bihar, Sarna’s (1993) work on the Sikhs in Kashmir, and Banerjee’s (2003) analysis of Sikh literature published in Assamese, Bengali, and Oriya between 1845 and 1947. These contributions are primarily textual analyses of historical documents and make passing notes on social practices and religious worship in the respective cultural settings.

<sup>2</sup> *Census of India 2001* at the web site: [www.censusindia.net](http://www.censusindia.net).

field-work experience. But reflection followed, and in the subsequent weeks my thoughts returned to the manager's words. After all, I was there to learn about the Sikh religion. Had the problem of religious identity taken priority in the academic society and public representations of Sikhism, but was marginal to local practicing Sikhs? Were the questions I had posed merely a reflection of my own preconceived knowledge and naive prejudices about the Sikh religion? Could my own "failure" lead to something new? With his speech and body language the manager had in fact instructively pointed to another matter he considered far more important to a research study and a Sikh way of life. After two months of experiences at Varanasi I went home to complete the master thesis that was expected from me. Before my departure, however, I decided to return the year after to search answers to the queries that were nagging me inside. This time I would leave the academic textbooks behind and rely on the voices and guidance of local Sikhs. The search, which continued over the following years, would bring me to the core of the Sikh congregation at Varanasi and inside the Guru's gate, to religious acts conducted in the presence of their sacred scripture – the Guru Granth Sahib.

Religious practices relating to Guru Granth Sahib will certainly be mentioned in any introductory book on Sikhism. The Sikh community is a "textual community" – a social group whose beliefs and practices are centred around a sacred text.<sup>3</sup> Wherever in the world the Sikhs have settled and live today their scripture is staged at the core of devotional congregations. The Sikh place of worship – the *gurdwara* – is by definition a space in which Guru Granth Sahib is made present to run a daily court. In the early morning hours the scripture is installed on an elevated throne to admit worshippers. Throughout the day Sikh disciples will humbly approach the sacred text to present prayers, food-offerings and other gifts, as if they obtained audience in the court of a royal sovereign. At nightfall the Guru Granth Sahib is ceremonially put to rest on a bedecked four-poster bed in a special bedroom. During festivals days, or whenever the scripture is moved from one location to another, the Sikhs organize lavish processions. Almost every ceremony in the individual life of devotees is conducted in the presence of the physical text. In services at the *gurdwara* and in private houses the Sikhs daily recite and sing hymns from the scripture, and explore its semantic inner in oral expositions and discourses for understanding and guidance in their social life. The living performance traditions of rendering the sacred verses of Guru Granth Sahib cast a haze of quotations over the whole Sikh life. A mere glimpse at these practices seems to suggest that the Sikhs have taken the concept of a sacred scripture much further than any other religious community by treating the Guru Granth Sahib as a living Guru. To develop and sustain a devotional and didactical relationship, even a social relationship, to the scripture and the teaching it enshrines is what makes people Sikhs – disciples of the Guru.

The present work is an ethnographic study of religious practices and beliefs among Sikhs in a local community at Varanasi in Northern India. The study focuses

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<sup>3</sup> Stock 1983.



on Sikh conceptualizations and interactions with the Guru Granth Sahib and other religious texts accredited *gurbani* status, that is, words being uttered by the human Gurus. A primary aim is to examine the implications of perceiving the Guru Granth Sahib as a scripture which enfolds words of an ontologically divine nature and mediates the revelatory experiences and teaching of historical human Gurus. Simultaneously the sacred text is considered to be the living Guru with authority and agency to provide spiritual guidance and establish human-divine connections. By which means do local Sikhs interact with the sacred words of their scripture? How do they perceive, confirm, and establish agency of a living Guru in their daily worship? The scholarly study of Sikhism has long neglected the religious worship acts that Sikhs practice in public and private spheres to instead favour historical, theological, and political aspects of the Sikh tradition. Those plain acts which to most Sikhs appear self-evident and yet are so important to their religious life have been given considerably little attention, unless they have been able to generate profound symbolic meanings to link up with sociological and historical theories. The Sikh scripture has primarily been approached from a textual viewpoint, as a canonized collection of the human Gurus' written compositions, while little light has been shed on oral traditions and living practices to render the sacred words. Starting from a theoretical perspective based on performance and ritual theory, the present study will investigate a wide spectrum of common religious practices that are directed towards the scriptural body of the Guru Granth Sahib and intend to make devotees engage in and benefit from the words and teaching of the Guru dwelling within the scripture. The focus will be on contemporary religious uses and stances towards the Sikh scripture and other *gurbani* hymns, and the scripture's interaction with devotees in multiple contexts of performances. It is these performances of the canonized scripture and the recorded utterances of the Gurus that bring the sacred texts to life. Major sections of the study will be descriptive in character since ethnographies providing empirical data on lived practices among the Sikhs must necessarily precede more sophisticated theoretical elaborations.

The study has been organized into five chapters, which successively describe and analyse the discursive and ritual means by which local Sikhs impart presence and agency of the historical human gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the eternal words of the scripture. The first chapter will depict the history and social constitution of the local Sikh community at Varanasi and examine the emic historiography, in other words, the construction of a collective and meaningful history. Instead of submitting to the master narrative of Varanasi, as the center of Hindu pilgrimage and learning, the Sikhs have created their own interpretation of the past which counters the dominant Hindu paradigm and confirms the spiritual superiority of the Sikh Gurus. The retelling of this history and the ritual veneration of the Gurus' seats, their personal belongings, and letters to the congregation at Varanasi continue to manifest the human Gurus' enduring power in the city.

The second chapter is devoted to different religious conceptions and attitudes towards the Guru Granth Sahib among the Sikhs at Varanasi. How do local devotees

perceive and treat their scripture? By which religious measures do they make the agency of the Guru, embodied in a text, perpetually alive? As this section will illustrate, Sikh discourses on the Guru Granth Sahib situate the scripture in a web of relationships – onto-theological relationships to the invisible divine, historical relationships to the human Gurus, and social relationships to contemporary disciples – that legitimize both the worldly and otherworldly identity and power of the scriptural Guru. Special attention will be directed to the construction of sacred space and time around the Guru Granth Sahib. By arranging spaces and symbols in the gurdwara and enacting stipulated acts, the Sikhs enmesh the scripture in daily routines of a sovereign which enable a continued revelation of its interior teaching and sustain their devotional bonds to the Guru. The latter part of the chapter will focus on lay-Sikhs and professional performers who constantly dwell in the spaces surrounding Guru Granth Sahib and the religious means by which they invest the scripture with social agency. What are the religious significations of becoming a disciple of the Guru and serve the written scripture like a supreme ruler? What are the responsibilities and qualifications of Sikh reciters, musicians, and expounders, whose primary duty is to bring out the scripture's words and teaching? How is the sacred text printed, transported, and incorporated into the social and religious life of devotees? The final section will suggest that contemporary Sikh practices stage the Guru Granth Sahib as an agentive Guru who has its own life with ritually marked-out life events. A modern cremation ceremony for scriptures strongly emphasizes that Guru Granth Sahib is not an ordinary book for purchase, but a Guru who continuously assumes the canonized body-form of a scripture to mediate divine messages to the world.

In the third chapter I will provide descriptions of six types of devotional practices that are characteristic of the Sikh religious life: reciting, singing, narrating, meditating, praying, and conducting social work. Through these worship acts local Sikhs continually interact with the words of Guru Granth Sahib and other *gurbani* texts, and attempt to establish links to the formless and invisible divine. Approaching the practices as religious performances, I will give special attention to the formal features and conventions that are actualized when written words move into oral performance and become social action. This section will also discuss culture-specific interpretations and notions related to the devotional practices and separate *gurbani* texts. From a religious standpoint, the worship acts may represent a continually realized revelation scheme, according to which the Guru's teaching is mediated through recitations (*path*) and songs (*kirtan*), narrated in oral expositions (*katha*), repeated and reflected upon in the human interior (*simran*), to be implemented in the world through selfless actions (*seva*) that will benefit other people. Reading the standardized Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) becomes the religious means to contextualize performances and communicate, to a divine addressee, what is taking place in the social world of humans.

The aforementioned acts of worship are frequently enacted within the framework of much larger social events. Chapter four will provide descriptions of ceremonies related to different stages in life, festivals in the Sikh calendar, and religious practices that people take refuge in when they experience disorder in their social life

and suffer from physical or mental ill-health. Common typologies of rituals among scholars, such as rites of passage, calendric rites, rituals of affliction, and the like, sometimes give the impression that any of the given categories refer to a single ritual act, while the enactment of a certain type of ritual usually encompasses a cluster of acts that are performed simultaneously and/or successively to co-jointly constitute the external structure of a ceremonial happening. The chapter treats the traditional typologies of rituals as different examples of context-specific events, which provide the social settings for worship acts that render and implement the Guru's words and teaching.

The last chapter of the study is theoretical in character and raises questions concerning the meanings of religious acts and worship. Starting from the general assumption that meanings are human constructions drawn from contextual and situational elements, rather than being intrinsic elements of formalized acts, the chapter will discuss how people may derive multiple meanings – spiritual, symbolic, social, and other – from discourses and events surrounding their religious actions. People superimpose their acts with meanings, which they represent to themselves and to others. While some social and religious meanings are highly stipulated by the Sikh tradition, others are constantly changing depending on altering contexts and discourses. To religious Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib is also considered to be a treasure of all the meanings that could ever be relevant in the human life. *Gurbani* hymns are sometimes interpreted as instructions on the meaning or the result which a certain religious act can be expected to have or bring about. The scripture, the tradition, and the different performance situations, in which the Sikhs venerate the physical text and utilize its words, are thus foundational for the construction of individual and collective meanings. Both the text and the context in continuing processes of interaction make religious worship meaningful. As the final part of the study will also illustrate, lay Sikhs at Varanasi do not necessarily consider liberation from the cycle of rebirth as the ultimate goal or a "higher" meaning of their devotional activities, but to sincerely commit to the sacred words of Guru Granth Sahib and sustain an intimate relationship to the Guru becomes the means and the end in itself.

The disposition of the chapters aims at unfolding a structure, which firstly paints the broader historical and social picture of the Sikh community at Varanasi (Chapter 1) and then focuses on the religious acts by which devotees venerate the scriptural embodiment of the Guru (Chapter 2) and render, explore, and implement its interior teaching in religious performances (Chapter 3). The latter part of the study describes how local Sikhs may perform these religious acts in different contexts of ceremonies and times of need (Chapter 4), in order to analyze how they may derive multiple meanings of their devotional activities from the sacred texts and the ever-changing contexts (Chapter 5).

## TEXT IN CONTEXT AND PERFORMANCE: AN OVERVIEW

For quite some time a growing body of research studies in Comparative Religion has slowly moved away from an exclusive textualist approach in the study of scriptures and sacred texts to instead direct attention to how texts are conceptualized, treated, and used in different times and cultures. Olsson (2001) purports that studies within the discipline of History and Anthropology of Religion should attempt to understand texts in their *sitz in leben*, that is, the contexts in which texts are used is a primary object of focus.<sup>4</sup> In the move towards the study of “texts in context” scholars have paid attention to the multiple uses and ways by which people encounter both oral and written texts, and the complexity of relationships that can exist between texts, practices and contexts.<sup>5</sup> A simple decoding of the content is no longer a sufficient methodological approach as sacred texts may convey heterogeneous meanings that are highly context-sensitive. Moreover, holy writs do not merely serve to communicate referential and symbolic meanings or reflect their historical contexts, but can assume functional roles and even become potential social actors in the religious life of people.<sup>6</sup>

In these debates scholars have paid considerable attention to the different media by which texts are transmitted and particularly how the media shapes surrounding discourses and practices. Comparative studies of religious scriptures have highlighted the differences and similarities between religions that favor the oral transmission of texts – such as Buddhism and Brahmanic Hinduism – and those which privilege written texts – like Christianity and Islam.<sup>7</sup> Considerable debates evolved around the effects of literacy and the processes of committing spoken words to writing.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of the so-called “literacy thesis”<sup>9</sup> contended that writing had historically been accountable for new forms of discourses and reflective thinking. From a Euro-centric thinking, this scholarship perceived orality a more primitive cultural condition which societies eventually would leave as they develop into written cultures. The effect of writing and literacy – the transfer from an oral to a written culture, and later print culture – implied an evolutionary transformation of humans and their relationship to

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<sup>4</sup> Olsson 2001a: 12.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Coburn 1984, Timm 1992.

<sup>6</sup> In an interesting article on the codification of a Taoist liturgy, Bell (1988) treats the “ritualization of text” – a process when ritual specialists integrate a text in ritual so that the text becomes accessible to people only through the specialists’ proper ritual performance. Bell demonstrates that a text does not only mirror its historical context but it can also be “an actor in those times” (1988: 368), in other words, when a text is being ritualized it plays a significant role in exercising social control and legitimizing authority.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g., Graham 1987, Coward 1988, Levering 1989.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Goody and Watt 1963, Havelock 1976, Goody 1977, Ong 2002 (1982).

<sup>9</sup> Critics of the thesis have changed the term to “literacy hypothesis”. See the articles in Olson & Torrance 1991.

language and society.<sup>10</sup> In response to the literacy thesis a large bulk of critical literature evolved to argue against the implied assumption about superiority of Western literacy.<sup>11</sup> Although anthropology in its early phase undervalued oral cultures in its own way by treating orality as “traditional” (as opposed to “modern”), anthropologists explored indigenous systems, functions and abilities of oral transmission in order to demonstrate that most characteristics ascribed to literate societies were to be found in non-literate societies and oral cultures as well.<sup>12</sup>

In these discussions the Vedic Hinduism has often served as a case in point of a predominantly oral culture. Comparative analyses have claimed that the Vedic culture, unlike Western traditions, was undervaluing writing technologies and lived through the heard sound.<sup>13</sup> The scribal activity of committing words to writing was regarded a defilement of the sacred sound and by tradition a low status occupation. Oral transmission of words, on the contrary, was in the control of the high-caste priestly authority.<sup>14</sup> In more recent years scholars have re-evaluated the antagonistic dichotomy between oral and written cultures and given way for more balanced approaches which view both as mutually interactive: oral and written cultures coexist and affect each other through a range of complex relationships. Even in societies and religions that have been characterized by a literary culture (such as Islam) there are oral cultures to be found, just as oral cultures constantly interact with the written word.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the acknowledged picture of the Vedic tradition, later develop-

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<sup>10</sup> Some proponents of the literacy thesis have argued that written texts, unlike orally transmitted texts, were able to fix long commentaries and expositions, and thereby encouraged the development of abstract thinking, explanations and reasoning, i.e. improved humans’ rational thinking. Oral transmission remained concrete, particular and contexts-bound (see e.g. Ong 2002 (1982)). Scholars trained in post-colonial theory have partly adopted the literacy theory to claim that orality was a precondition for the creation of modern and politicized representations among colonized people. Writing was looked upon as a vehicle of authority inflicted by the colonial rulers, which the ruled, in turn, came to use as a means for creating new self-consciousnesses and self-representations. Oberoi’s much debated study on the Sikh reform movement Singh Sabha is partly based on the theory about the historical shift from oral to written culture (Oberoi 1995). For references to post-colonial studies in the African context, see Olsson 2006b: 246.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Gough 1968, Finnegan 1988, Narasimhan 1991.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Feldman’s (1991) analysis of Michelle Renaldo’s studies of the oral culture among the Ilongot.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Graham 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Contrary to this, supporters of the “literacy thesis” insisted on the existence of an early writing culture in the Vedic society. Goody (1987), for instance, argued that the Vedic tradition was indeed oral, but vested in the caste of literate specialists - the Brahmins. The redaction of Veda took place in a society with alphabetic writing and there existed an early written culture, even if Hindus denied this because of the religious taboo of committing the Vedas to writing. Goody found many reason for the Brahmins’ insistence on oral transmission: ecclesiastical power and control over religious material, its transmission and dissemination; the importance of personal mediation and intermediating teachers; or restricted access to manuscripts and the advantage of recalling content in absence of texts (Goody 1987: 118 – 120).

<sup>15</sup> Olsson 2006b.

ments in the Hindu culture, and especially the Bhakti movement, implied a radical reorientation towards sacred words by giving the same value and veneration to sound and the visual word in materialized texts.<sup>16</sup> Studies on the theories and practices of religious texts in Buddhism have even argued that people glorify books and manuscripts, just as much as the words they contain.<sup>17</sup> The physical book is not merely an important vehicle to convey a religious teaching, “but rather the *artifact* itself is worshipped apart from the communication of its content.”<sup>18</sup>

An important theoretical contribution to the study of “text in context” came with performance studies. In the 1970s the scholarly interest for performance as a special mode of verbal communication rose in a number of disciplines.<sup>19</sup> Rather than viewing communication exclusively in terms of conveying literal or referential messages, the performance-oriented approach paid attention to formal, stylistic and aesthetic features of verbal art, in other words, *how* messages were conveyed in culture-specific contexts. Advancing the theory, Bauman (1977) saw that “performance” was composed by *action* and *event* – the carrying out of action in a particular performance situation.<sup>20</sup> From a broad definition of communication as an interactive process, Bauman identified two criteria to distinguish performance from other cultural activities and communications: the assumption of responsibility on the part of the performer to display verbal skills beyond the requirements of factual communication, and the emergent quality of performance, that is, the ability to enhance a unique experience.<sup>21</sup> Building on Bateson’s concept of “framing” and meta-communication, Bauman argued that performance constitutes a different order of communication and “interpretative frames” within which instructive messages are given to understand the performance. The interpretative frames inform that what is happening within this frame is to be understood as a performance. Students of verbal art, he suggested,

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<sup>16</sup> Mackenzie Brown 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Schopen has argued that Buddhist texts are valued for their inherent salvific powers and are treated as relics. He coined the popular expression “the cult of the book” for practices which elevate the worship of physical books and manuscripts to a cult (Schopen 1975, 1978, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Veidlinger 2006: 411.

<sup>19</sup> Especially folkloristic and sociolinguistic scholars approached performances of verbal art. The works of Abrahams (e.g. 1970), Hymes (e.g. 1975), and Bauman (e.g. 1977), among others, were influential contributions to the design of performance theory. Performance studies in anthropology have often drawn upon Austin’s notion of “performative utterances” to focus on the syntactics and functional aspects of verbal action, while others have been more inclined to use semantic-oriented approaches to see how “cultural performances” or “social drama” represent or produce cultural and symbolic systems. For an overview of different approaches, consult Bell 1997.

<sup>20</sup> According to Abrahams (1976) the socio-cultural preconditions for identifying “performance” are: (1) a situation in which performances are approved and expected; (2) there are members of the community who are given license to perform; (3) conventional and stylized ideal types of expression announced by framing the event; and (4) the repertoire of items that fulfils the formal requirements of expectations are available to performers (Abrahams 1976: 13 – 14).

<sup>21</sup> Bauman 1977: 4, 11.

should focus on the culture-specific ways by which people accomplish this framing and how performance is “keyed” by, for example, special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special formulae, or paralinguistic features.<sup>22</sup> Bauman argued that studies which solely privilege literal frames fail to appreciate the phenomenological reality of live verbal art performance. When fixed texts move into performance they become oral communication and thereby adopt other communicative modes than the literal.

Performance studies were also criticized for concentrating solely on contextual aspects and expanding the definition of “text” to metaphorical heights when there was a meaningful text, even a physical written text, present.<sup>23</sup> In his book about Tamil bow songs, Blackburn (1988) argued that performance studies had been too preoccupied with exploring contextual and formal properties of performance, while the “texts receded into a metaphor – everything except oral performance was approached as a text”.<sup>24</sup> Blackburn’s own study was an attempt to bring back a “text-centered approach to performance”, which “consciously rejects the claim that the meaning of a text lies only in performance”, but the text “carries meaning as it moves into performance.”<sup>25</sup> A text, written or oral, can set the terms for its formal reproduction, just as people derive meanings of performance from the content of the text. Text and context are thus two interrelated aspects of verbal art performances.

Performance theory was widely applied in ethnographic studies of verbal art in India, especially as folklorists began to fear that local and regional oral traditions would vanish in face of modernization and a higher rate of literacy.<sup>26</sup> A study that has succeeded in analyzing the intricate relationship between written text and oral performance is Lutgendorf’s book *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsi-das* (1991). Applying Bauman’s theoretical approach to performance as a distinctive mode of communication with formal and affective dimensions, Lutgendorf offers a detailed account of living performance traditions which render the *Ramcaritmanas* epic in oral recitations, staged “story-tellings” or oral exegesis, and theatrical enact-

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<sup>22</sup> Baumann 1977: 16 - 22.

<sup>23</sup> Whether the text or the context is most significant to performance has been a controversy among folklorists since the 1970s. For overview of this controversy, consult Ben-Amos 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Blackburn 1988: xvii. Ben-Amos observes that the text metaphor has actually transformed texts into contexts: “By turning terms around, Paul Riccoer has proposed a kind of nominalistic solution to the apparent dichotomy between text and context by conceiving and naming social actions as text. In such a renaming, text becomes a metaphor for context.” Ben-Amos 1993: 211. Hanks (1989) defines “text” as “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users”, which could encompass oral and written discourses, paintings, music, etc (Hanks 1989: 95).

<sup>25</sup> Blackburn 1988: xviii- xix. In response Ben-Amos (1993) has argued that texts are still context-dependant, since it is ultimately the speakers and listeners of texts who attribute meanings they perceive in them. When a text appears to be fixed in terms of themes and structure it is the variable contexts that explain differences in meanings (Ben-Amos 1993: 212).

<sup>26</sup> Access to printed texts and the ability of reading texts have instead encouraged new forms of oral traditions (See Kaushal 2001).

ments. The author provides vivid descriptions of the ways by which lay-people interact with the *Ramcaritmanas* and the strategies and techniques professional performers use to build up artistic competence and “affective” performances. Through oral expositions people perceive the written words of the epic eternally fixed, yet constantly open for the attribution of new meanings. Lutgendorf’s study illustrates the multiple functions of *Ramcaritmanas* in the Hindu culture and how oral performances of the text remain alive side by side with new communication media. Even if the epic was committed to print in the nineteenth century and its “story-telling” is today available on cassette and TV-shows, the oral performance traditions continue to flourish.

Considering the status and authority of Guru Granth Sahib in the Sikh community, it is surprising that scholars have paid so little attention to the ways by which Sikhs in India and beyond conceptualize and use their sacred scripture in worship.<sup>27</sup> The scholarship in Sikh studies has retained a predominant textualist and historical approach which emphasizes those aspects of the religion which manifest a written tradition. The existence of early manuscripts versions of the Sikh scripture, the development of the Gurmukhi script, and the high status granted Sikh scribes seem to indicate that the Sikh Gurus themselves venerated writing, and even considered the act of inscribing devotional hymns an act of worship. The emergence of exegetical texts from the sixteenth century, the recording of hagiographies about the life and deeds of Guru Nanak (*Janam-sakhi*) from the seventeenth century, and stories glorifying the lives of other Gurus (*Gurbilas*) and Sikh martyrs (*Shahidbilas*) a century later, corroborates that writing, and particularly historical writing, has for long occupied significance in the Sikh tradition. In its very design the religion embodies a relation to a history which connects the Sikhs with a pristine past, and particularly the period of human Sikh Gurus (1469 – 1708). Contemporary scholars following the textual and history-directed paradigm have generated monumental contributions on the genesis and compilation history of the Sikh scripture,<sup>28</sup> the poetic form and metrics of the scripture,<sup>29</sup> exegetical analyses,<sup>30</sup> and the development of manuals of the normative Sikh code of conduct.<sup>31</sup> Preservations of historical documents have rendered it possible to document and reconstruct a history of the Guru Granth Sahib that is quite unique in comparison to other religious traditions.

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<sup>27</sup> Already in the 1970s the historian McLeod appeared to have called for an anthropological and performance-oriented approach to the study of the Sikh scripture when he raised the following questions for future investigation: “How does he or she regard the scripture and how is that regard expressed in practice? Does the scripture serve as a source of ideas or rather as a source of inspiration? If the latter, is it a comprehending inspiration or is the scripture treated more as a talisman? [...] what benefits are understood to derive from *darsan* of the Guru Granth Sahib? What is the current understanding and actual usage of the *akhand path*?” McLeod 1979: 105.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Pashaura Singh 2000, Mann 2001.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. Kohli 1992, Guninder Kaur 1995.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Gurnek Singh 1998. For a feminist scriptural exegesis, consult Nikky Kaur Singh 1993.

<sup>31</sup> McLeod 2003.



At the same time an oral transmission of the sacred utterances of the Sikh Gurus (*gurbani*) seems to run parallel with a textual tradition in Sikh history, even after the Gurus' compositions were scripturalized. The engagement in oral performances of the sacred words, such as reading, reciting, and singing, was a primary means of religious devotion in the Gurus' teaching. For centuries Sikh devotees would also narrate stories about the Gurus' deeds and sing heroic folk-songs praising their grandeur.<sup>32</sup> Even when the Sikh community gathered for worship in presence of standardized printed versions of the Guru Granth Sahib, oral renditions of the sacred teaching remained at the core. The oral dimensions of Sikh worship will be mentioned in textualist scholarship,<sup>33</sup> but the prime concern has so far been the collective history and religious beliefs as largely defined by a written tradition.

Treading on the path of scholarly dichotomies (like sound/written word) a few attempts have been made to highlight the importance of sound in the transmission of holy words from Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>34</sup> The Sikh tradition, it has been argued, presents a "Janus head" which challenges the traditional dichotomy between traditions that privileged sound and those which privileged inscriptions of sacred words.<sup>35</sup> The Sikhs gather around a written scripture without subordinating sound and oral uses of the sacred text. Unlike the predominantly Western "dualistic ideology of language", which privileges referential messages of language and texts, the Sikhs have adopted a "nondualistic ideology" that recognizes semantic meanings as well as sound and material properties of the sacred language.<sup>36</sup>

Anthropological and sociological scholarships have also looked into Sikh and Punjabi practices from much broader social perspectives. The growing interest for village studies from the 1950s resulted in several important ethnographies on social behaviors and ritual performances in Sikh villages of the Punjab.<sup>37</sup> A considerable array of scholarly data was accumulated on the social and economical aspects of particular "life-cycle" events, especially marriage practices in different parts of the

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<sup>32</sup> McLeod 1980a, Nijhawan 2006b.

<sup>33</sup> See particularly Chapter 9 in Pashaura Singh 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Goa & Coward 1986, Coward 1988.

<sup>35</sup> Staal 1979b.

<sup>36</sup> Dusenbery 1992. My spontaneous objection to these theories is the strong emphasis on the media for rendering sacred words and theoretical claims of universal applicability. Many Sikhs, I believe, perceive both sound and written inscriptions of *gurbani* as important vehicles to mediate sacred words, but what provides these media sacredness and an infinite number of properties is what they contain: *gurbani*. The reluctance to use translated version of Guru Granth Sahib in worship does not merely reflect different language ideologies between South Asia and the West, but it involves ontological questions concerning the nature and origin of *gurbani*. To retain oral uses of the Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurmukhi script is to preserve the original form of ontologically divine words that materialized in the speech and writings of the Gurus.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Indera P. Singh 1959, Mathur 1964, Leaf 1972, Gheerdyal Singh 1974.

state.<sup>38</sup> The extensive migration from the Punjab in the twentieth century encouraged a large interest in re-inventions and challenges of social norms and cultural practices among Punjabis settled in a Diaspora.<sup>39</sup> Quite often these studies portray the Sikh community with shared symbolic codes and approach ritual practices from a rather functionalist paradigm: ritual action is systematically related to social aspects and functions to confirm the most guarded norms, values, and concepts in the society. Sikh practices which involve the use of Guru Granth Sahib are briefly described in anthropological scholarship, even if the favored concentration has been broader social phenomena, such as caste and kinship systems, generational changes, identity and migration. Comprehensive ethnographies on lived religious practices among the Sikhs, and particularly those which involve the Guru Granth Sahib, are still missing.

### RITUALS: ATTITUDES AND PERSPECTIVES

An issue occasionally brought up for discussion in anthropological and sociological studies is the tension between the “normative” and the “operative” level of religious beliefs and practices. In a sociological study of Sikhism in rural Punjab, McMullen (1989) made this tension a theoretical starting point.<sup>40</sup> From the data collected in quantitative interviews with two hundred Sikhs, McMullen compared people’s theological conceptions, soteriological beliefs, and worship routines with normative standards. In his analyses he defined the distinction between the normative level and the operative level of religiosity as follows:

Normative beliefs and practices are those which are officially stated and prescribed or proscribed by a recognized religious authority, which can be a person, organization or an official statement. Operative beliefs and practices, on the other hand, are those actually held by people.<sup>41</sup>

What is officially considered to be normative with regard to practices in the Sikh community is the present Sikh code of conduct, or the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Writing manuals on normative Sikh conducts, so-called *rahit-namas*, is a tradition which began in the eighteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The historical *rahit-namas* have different authors and deal with numerous ethical and social aspects of a Sikh life. The texts are not exclusively ritual manuals, even if prescriptions of worship acts and ceremonies do

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<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Jaspal Singh 1966; Balwinderjeet Kaur 1967, Rajagopalan & Singh 1967, Parry 1979, Hershman 1981, Jyoti 1992, Kalsi 1996, Myrvold 2004a, 2005a, 2006. See also the project on the people of Punjab launched by the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), K. S. Singh 2003.

<sup>39</sup> 2. See e.g. Ballard & Ballard 1977, Helweg 1979, Bhachu 1985, Bhachu 1986, Barrier & Dusenberry 1989, Ballard 1990, Leonard 1992, Mann 2000, Verma 2002, Gurharpal Singh & Tatla 2006.

<sup>40</sup> For a similar approach, see also Michaud 1998.

<sup>41</sup> McMullen 1989: 5.

<sup>42</sup> McLeod 2003.

take up a great deal of space. The existence of *rahit-namas* reflects endeavors to standardize Sikh beliefs and practices in writing and by doing this the Guru Granth Sahib is given a prominent position. The process of compiling these manuals is an example of what Bell (1988) calls “textualization of ritual” whereby existing practices are selected and fixed in written manuals. The process of textualization encourages the rise of more standardized ritual action and has the effect of defining “orthodox” rituals that are differentiated from local practices and codified. The manual gives certain practices authority and is foundational for a “ritual institution.”<sup>43</sup>

In the Sikh tradition the validity of proper conducts and acts of worship has remained at the centre of religious reform. The Sikh reform movement *Singh Sabha* in the late nineteenth century came to exercise considerable influence on contemporary Sikh practices by codifying ritual standards for a community which, due to new means of communication and migration, was no longer restricted to the Punjab region.<sup>44</sup> The Gurdwara Reform Movement in the 1920s represents a radical turning-point with regard to collective worship forms. The Sikh community took charge of gurdwaras, many of which had earlier been administered by Hindu mahants. In discourses and campaigns, Sikh reformers protested at the corrupt ways by which religious specialists had staged worship to the Sikh scripture in a conspicuously Hindu idiom. The agenda was to abandon ritual elements thought to be Hindu and revise practices which granted the Guru Granth Sahib absolute authority. In 1925 the autonomous Sikh organization *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC) was formed to provide a self-reliant system for management of all Sikh shrines and gurdwaras in the state of Punjab.

The present Sikh code of conduct, sanctioned by the SGPC in 1950, is briefly describing Sikh articles of faith: it mentions the belief in one God, the “oneness” of ten Gurus and their teaching, and the Guru Granth Sahib. In conformity with the *rahit-nama* tradition the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* is mainly orthopraxical by stipulating normative ethical conducts and ritual behaviours. The guiding maxim of the Sikh community today thus attempts to mould Sikh identities by prescribing a set of conducts which, if followed, will produce behaviours and attitudes that more circuitously reinforce beliefs and implement the Gurus’ teaching enshrined in the scripture. Modern writers with a mission to demonstrate Sikh ceremonies frequently choose to fall back on this manual rather than portraying “operative” practices in the lived reality.<sup>45</sup> Normative prescriptions which have been sanctioned by the authoritative tradition come to stand as descriptions of what Sikhs are doing in their religious life.

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<sup>43</sup> Bell 1988: 390 – 392.

<sup>44</sup> Oberoi 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Typical examples of this tendency are found in Loehlin 1974 and Joginder Singh 1999.

## THE PARADOX OF RITUAL

The reason why the distinction between normative and operative levels is mentioned here is not because the comparative perspective has been deemed analytically useful for this study,<sup>46</sup> but for the reason that a similar tension seems to have generated the paradox of ritual in studies of the Sikh tradition. Sikhism is often presented as a religion which reacted against conventionalism. More radical writings would even describe the tradition as “anti-ritualistic”. It is widely held that the Sikhs Gurus regarded rituals as obstacles for spiritual progress and did not hesitate to level criticism of the reliance on ritualism in their writings. Provocatively they let religious practices of other traditions serve as analogies to express key devotional elements of their own teaching. Guru Nanak, for instance, emphasized the danger of performing rituals without true understanding of God and with pride, fear, and selfishness. This will entangle humans in worldly desires and lead them astray from the path of liberation.<sup>47</sup> At the same time the Sikh tradition holds the Gurus responsible for founding different practices and conventions – daily worship routines, festivals, pilgrimage, ceremonies, etc., – that in course of time evolved to formal structures and ritual institutions. Although scholars in Sikh studies have generally displayed a weak interest in the study of rituals, the paradox between the Gurus’ teaching and later developments within the Sikh community have compelled many writers to take up positions regarding the notion and practice of rituals. Today at least three general approaches towards rituals are discernable among Indian and Western writers on the Sikh religion.

The first position will acknowledge the agentive power of the Gurus to establish new collective patterns of behavior and institutional structures that constituted alternatives to practices in their own time.<sup>48</sup> In the Sikh congregation at Kartarpur from the early sixteenth century, Guru Nanak created daily routines of reciting and singing

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<sup>46</sup> An ethnographical study based on comparisons between normative and operative practices is, in my opinion, a rather unproductive enterprise for two reasons: firstly it involves methodological problems of determining the normative criteria. The *Sikh Rahit Maryada* may appear to give clear-cut answers on what the Sikhs should do in their religious life, but the manual does not provide the kind of explicit rules and instructions that Sikhs sometimes suppose it to contain, nor detail religious behaviours that are (or should be) contradictory to the exemplary Sikh way of living. The manual is in itself open for interpretations, and the “gap” that emerges between what is recorded and what is left out can become dynamic sites of negotiation and interpretation in a local community. Provided that normative standards are relevant to local people, a comparative study of the normative level and the operative level would force the researcher to discuss religious practices in extremely generalizing terms. Secondly, a comparison between these two levels – whether the Gurus’ teaching or the code of conduct of the authoritative tradition is compared with lived and popular practices – will result in the rather self-evident conclusion that some individuals indeed try to follow what in their view is correct conduct, while the majority do not.

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. GGS: 229.

<sup>48</sup> See e.g. McMullen 1989, Grewal 1999.

compositions for those who lived and gathered there. Since a spiritual message cannot flourish and be sustained without an organization, Guru Nanak and the following Gurus intentionally founded practices and institutions that would implement their teaching in different historical and social contexts. According to this view, the Gurus cleared the ground for a new identity by establishing alternative and distinctive ritual practices of the Sikhs.

The second and more protestant approach will emphasize doctrinal aspects and perceive the gradual rise of ritual activities within the Sikh community as a gradual degeneration of Gurus' teaching.<sup>49</sup> The Gurus opposed ritual practices and started a movement against current conventions. In the course of time, however, the Sikhs developed their own ritualistic behaviors and slowly began to relapse to the Hindu fold. Thus when Sikhs celebrated festivals like Divali or Holi, or waved oil-lamps before the Guru Granth Sahib, the tradition was led astray from the pristine teaching and reverted to Hindu practices. From this perspective the Sikh reform movement Singh Sabha in the nineteenth century was the modern attempt to once and for all do away with these influences on the Sikh teaching and tradition.

A third and apologetic approach on the extreme side starts from a principle of negation, that is, ritual elements are strongly negated in order to represent Sikhism as a rational religion. Kohli's book with the striking title *Ritualism and its Rejection in Sikhism* (2000) may serve as an example. From the general presumption that the Sikh Gurus antagonize rituals, Kohli argues that there exist no rituals, ceremonies or sacraments in Sikhism, in contrast to ritual behaviors in other traditions, including the Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Muslim. As he writes about Hinduism, "great emphasis is laid on the performance of rites and ceremonies, which are considered necessary for advancement in the spiritual domain".<sup>50</sup> When the Sikhs, on the other hand, attend the gurdwara, participate in prayers, take religious baths, and perform life-cycle ceremonies, they are merely enacting their "religious and secular duties".<sup>51</sup> Why the Muslim prayer, for instance, should be classified as ritualism while the Sikh daily prayer is not, Kohli answers by alleging that Sikhism is about inward devotion – a statement he finds support for in the Sikh scripture. When apologetics, like this example, claim to portray history in an objective manner they often point forward in time, towards the acknowledgment of Sikhism as a modern and rational world religion in the future and the spiritual redemption of all who adhere to it. The association with rituals, interpreted as empty action without inner commitment, should not make a part of Sikhism as it moves into the future.

It should be observed that the ambivalent attitude towards rituals is in no way typical of Sikhism. Ritual activities have been a traditional target of religious reform and debate in many other religions in India as well as Europe. At different times in history reformists in the Buddhist, Hindu and Jain traditions have elevated physical

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<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Cole 1982b.

<sup>50</sup> Kohli 2000: 127.

<sup>51</sup> Kohli 2000: 119.

texts as objects of veneration in attempts to move away from predominant relic cults and idol worship to instead stress the importance of doctrines within sacred texts. In the medieval Hindu Bhakti movement dependence on rituals was considered one of the things that bound people to blind worship and cravings. Some traditions within the Bhakti movement committed Hindu texts to writing and developed “cults of the book” in reaction to the Brahmin authority and the formalized oral transmissions of the Vedas.<sup>52</sup> To mark a return to a pristine teaching, Jainism reformists explicitly abandoned ritual practices before Jina images and staged visual representations of texts at the centre of worship.<sup>53</sup> Seeing representations of a text was perceived to be a way to partake of its content. Similarly, the educated Christian elite in Europe gave rituals a second-hand value in relation to beliefs, moral and textual interpretations. As Muir (1997) notes, “[B]y the eighteenth century[...]ritual came to imply insincerity and empty formality, the very antithesis of the Enlightenment values that prized individual spontaneity and authenticity.”<sup>54</sup> Although ritual practices persisted among laypeople they were no longer considered compatible with modern and rational values of the intellectual elite.<sup>55</sup> The Christian antagonism of rituals was the product of a modernist and evolutionary paradigm, according to which rituals were viewed as something the “civilized” people had surmounted long ago. The “primitives” continued to dedicate their lives to routinized acts but would eventually evolve into modern rationalists.

By the end of nineteenth century the evolutionary paradigm came to color much of the Western scholarship in humanities. Studies of rituals were often an integral part in anthropological and historical writings on other cultures, however given a peripheral position in comparison with the study of myths and beliefs.<sup>56</sup> In Victorian Great Britain the Christian resentment against ritualism animated public debates that came to exert a major influence on the society.<sup>57</sup> In a critical response to these

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<sup>52</sup> Mackenzie Brown 1986.

<sup>53</sup> In the fifteenth century, the Jain reform sect Taranapant eliminated images of the Jina and established marble models of sacred books as the central object of worship. The exchange of idol in human form for a representation of books was a protest intended to articulate a rejection of idolatrous practices and an ideological restoration of original Jain beliefs (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 51).

<sup>54</sup> Muir 1997: 269.

<sup>55</sup> Muir 1997: 16.

<sup>56</sup> The myth and ritual school, associated with Frazer and others, considered myths to be an outgrowth of patterns and structures of rituals. Origin myths, legends, folktales, and other texts were spoken correlates of what originally had been practiced in a society and could be used as a means to go back to original ritual practices. Except for viewing rituals as timeless, the underlying assumption behind the myth and ritual school was the idea that rituals in primitive societies would eventually disappear and evolve into a more civilized state (Stausberg 2002).

<sup>57</sup> When the British scholar Robertson Smith argued in a book on the religious life of the Semites (1889) that ritual practices indeed have significant functions to constitute and maintain religion, his ideas were deemed ideologically incorrect and he was consequently suspended from his position (Stausberg 2002: 17). Working within the evolutionary framework, Robertson Smith

debates, Douglas (1970) observed that ritual had developed into a depreciatory word associated with empty conformity: "The ritualist becomes one who performs external gestures which imply commitment to a particular set of values, but he is inwardly withdrawn, dried out and uncommitted. This is a distractingly partisan use of the term [ritual]", she noted.<sup>58</sup> Douglas adopted a functionalist approach to argue that rituals are symbolic actions with power to create and express a meaningful universe. All human communication is ultimately dependent on symbolism.<sup>59</sup> She considered the antagonism of rituals illogical for two reasons: firstly, symbolic actions have power to secure stable social relations and organize the society. Secondly, the revolt of anti-ritualism would ultimately yield new recognitions of the need to ritualize. People who claim themselves to be anti-ritualistic are in reality only adopting new symbols in place of others.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to note, as Muir (1997) does, that discourses which attempt to reform religious worship and authority from rituals involve theories of representation and do not necessarily approach ritual action as a kind of human behaviour. In a study of Sikh practices the difference between what apologetics present the religion to be and what people actually do in their religious life becomes significant. Although intellectuals may represent the Sikh religion in terms of religious doctrines, history and moral principles for a number of underlying reasons,<sup>61</sup> Sikhs who live and practice their religion are more inclined to (re)present the religion by references to the

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purported that religious practices, customs and rituals were unchangeable over time, in comparison to the mythologies or meanings related to practices. As he argued, ritual practices were well established in ancient religions, while people could explain the meanings of rituals in various ways. To Robertson Smith, the myth derived from ritual and not the other way around, simply because rituals had a fixed and obligatory character (Robertson Smith 1927).

<sup>58</sup> Douglas 1970: 20.

<sup>59</sup> To explain why some societies have more rituals than others, Douglas (1970) developed the theory about social control and symbolic codes and the scheme of "group" and "grid". According to this scheme, a society with clear boundaries and well-defined roles, i.e., a strong group and grid, will certainly have a more developed ritual system, while a society with loose social control and not well-defined roles is prone to shun ritualism.

<sup>60</sup> As Douglas exemplified, fundamentalists who reject the magic of the Eucharist become magical in their attitude towards the Bible (Douglas 1970: 40).

<sup>61</sup> Arvind-Pal Singh (1996) has argued that Punjabi intellectual self-representations continue to bear the stamp of European modernist ideologies in the nineteenth century, as they culturally translate indigenous phenomena by using terminologies of European and Christian discourses. These discourses neutralize cultural differences in order to fit a homogenous and theologised representation of religion. During the colonial period some keywords of modernism – the self, history and the book – emerged in discourses that was mainly theological in character and which suppressed differences for a cultural rectification. These discourses created an "orthothological" understanding of religion, which became foundational for a modern identity and fostered a theological understanding of the written word. Singh refers to this process as a "theologization", which still manifests itself in Sikh literature and how Sikhs choose to represent themselves by means of the written word. Sikhism becomes a religion with an authentic history, a venerated founder, a revealed scripture, holding a unique and rational ideology.

teaching and history of the Gurus and their own religious action. They do not perceive their own worship acts as empty and monotonous imitations, but as primary means to express devotion. To them it is not necessarily a question of whether they should engage in ritual practices or not, but rather to which degree they perform actions with a sincere and truthful heart. Their practices, some of which appear to have assumed ritual characteristics, are not merely subservient to beliefs and “inner” aspects of the religion. Similar to what Bell (1992) argues to be typical of religious people in general, religion “is not a coherent belief system but, first and foremost, a collection of practices.”<sup>62</sup> It is primarily what the Sikhs do – their behaviors and actions – which gives substance to religion and foster religious identities and beliefs.

Given the value-laden debates on rituals it is crucial to underline that the word “ritual” in the English language is an analytical term seldom used by indigenous Sikhs.<sup>63</sup> The Punjabi language stores a large number of denotations for public fairs and festivals in the religious calendars (e.g. *utsav*, *mela*, *purub*, *tiohar*, *dihare*) and customs which families observe in daily life and on special occasions. Two Punjabi terms to signify a “custom”, “practice”, or “ceremony” performed in a formalized and traditional manner are *rasam* [Arabic] and *rit* [Sanskrit].<sup>64</sup> These words are often suffixed with the noun *rivaj*, meaning “currency” or “usual occurrence”,<sup>65</sup> to indicate that the action conducted is customary and conventional. Many of my interlocutors at Varanasi, for instance, used the compound *rit-rivaj* whenever they were talking about solemnized customs connected with social stages and transfers in life, such as naming ceremonies and weddings. Others would employ the Sanskrit word *samskara*, literally “refining” or “adorning”, for similar events.

In the following descriptions of Sikh practices in Varanasi I will mention the different indigenous terms in their respective contexts and simultaneously return to the analytical term “ritual”. The next step is therefore to determine what is meant here by the word and concept of ritual and what is analytically useful about it.

#### FORMALIZED AND RITUALIZED ACTION

Many of the influential ritual theories that have seen daylight during the twentieth century share a general emphasis on the conventional, formalized or rule-governed character of rituals, even if they have followed quite divergent and conflicting courses in terms of the functions, meanings, motives and forces they have attributed to ritual activities and behaviors.<sup>66</sup> In an attempt to move away from a scholarly proclivity to treat ritual as an autonomous object, or an independent set of activities that more or less exudes essential symbolic meanings of different kinds or implement conceptions,

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<sup>62</sup> Bell 1992: 185.

<sup>63</sup> For the etymology and history of the word ritual, consult Muir 1997.

<sup>64</sup> See Gill & Joshi 1999: 707, 725.

<sup>65</sup> McGregor 1997: 865.

<sup>66</sup> For a summary of some significant definitions of ritual by scholars in the twentieth century, see Platvoet 1995.



ritual theorists in recent decades have come to perceive ritual primarily as action which assumes certain qualities. This action is always acted out by humans within a social and situational context. Starting from the questions of what distinguishes ritual acts from ordinary act in the everyday life, and under which circumstances ritual activities differ from other human activities, many theorists of today would rather talk of rituals as a process by which the properties of ordinary acts are transformed.

In the move from an essence-oriented view to a process-directed approach, Catherine Bell (1988, 1992, 1997) familiarized the word *ritualization*, which according to her signified the ways by which action gradually assumes a ritualized character. Ritualization becomes “a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does.”<sup>67</sup> In her view there seem to be at least six typical traits of acts which have been exposed to the process of ritualization: ritual acts have a character of being formal, traditional, regular and recurrent, rule-governed, pregnant with symbols, and performative. Bell has illustrated the qualitative spectrum which characterizes ritualized acts and the ways by which cultures ritualize and de-ritualize activities in strategies to create and maintain power relations and social acts.<sup>68</sup>

Focusing more explicitly on the properties of ritual action and human agency, Humphrey & Laidlaw (1994) define ritualization as a “distinctive character”, which any kind of act can assume when the actor takes up, what they call, “the ‘ritual commitment’ – a particular stance with respect to his or her own action.”<sup>69</sup> This commitment or acceptance involves four interdependant aspects which indicate that action has become ritualized:

- (1) Ritual action is non-intentional, in the sense that while people performing ritual acts do have intentions (thus the actions are not unintentional), the *identity* of a ritualized act does not depends, as in the case with normal action, on the agent’s intention in acting.
- (2) Ritualized action is stipulated, in the sense that the constitution of separate acts out of the continuous flow of a person’s actions is not accomplished, as is the case with normal action, by processes of intentional understanding, but rather by constitutive rules which establish an ontology of ritual acts.
- (3) Such acts are perceived as discrete, named entities, with their own characters and histories, and it is for this reason we call such acts elemental and archetypal.
- (4) Because ritualized acts are felt, by those who perform them, to be external, they are also ‘apprehensible’. That is, they are always avail-

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<sup>67</sup> Bell 1997: 81.

<sup>68</sup> In Bell’s view ritual practice is a situational strategy, in the sense that action must be understood from its particular social situation and practice is often directed towards purposes or can be associated with individual intentions. See Bell 1992, 1997.

<sup>69</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 88.

able for a further reassimilation to the actors' intentions, attitudes and beliefs.<sup>70</sup>

The non-intentional quality of ritualized action does not imply that rituals are divorced from meanings and purposes. People do have many reasons for performing rituals. Humphrey & Laidlaw distinguish between motives and purpose that people may have for conducting acts and the immediate intention in the moment of acting. The motives and purpose may be of individual and social character, in the sense that people have their own individual motives for doing acts and share socially held purposes with others. The intention, on the other hand, signifies a more reflexive understanding of one's own action, in other words, what we and others presume we are doing in the act of doing it.

If someone would see my fingertips thrumming the keyboard in the moment I am writing these lines he or she would probably guess I am practising type-writing on the computer, creating a document, or just playing with the keys. All three alternatives would be possible. In order to choose the correct alternative which would identify the action taking place, however, the observer would need to grasp my intentional meaning in the moment of acting. This intention would determine the identity of my act performed (i.e. practicing type-writing, writing documents, or playing). My individual prior motives could be to communicate experiences of the Sikh religion or compose an introduction to my thesis, but this information would tell little about the character of the act enacted.

When action becomes ritualized, Humphrey & Laidlaw argue, the individual intention ceases to identify the act because actors who take up a ritual commitment come to perceive their acts as stipulated. Ritualization presents action as already constituted and external to the actors, as if the ritual act has an essential character, name, and history of its own. Thus, when people begin to ascribe certain acts a high level of stipulation, even regard them as pre-existing "objects", the properties of that action have been transformed by the process of ritualization. Actors will conduct acts which they perceive to be ontologically and historically prior to their own performance. In case thrumming fingertips on the computer's keyboard becomes a ritualized act there will be no need for an observer to search my situational intentions in order to recognize the act as, for instance, "type-writing"; he or she will be able to identify and name the act by its objectively discrete form. Humphrey & Laidlaw suggest that this quality of ritual action – the non-intentional, stipulated, and archetypal – enables actors to superimpose or attach their own meanings to the ritual acts, such as beliefs, intentions, motives and conceptions. In this way rituals can become "apprehensible" and open for assimilations of divergent subjective and social meanings without threatening the stipulated form and identity of ritual action. Meanings are to be found in discourses and contexts of the ritual enactment and will be ascribed to the ritualized acts by individuals or the collective group.

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<sup>70</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 89.

Humphrey & Laidlaw's claim to present a general theory of ritual has met with various and sometimes critical responses in the academic community.<sup>71</sup> Although one should be precautionary with a theory that makes this pretention, I do believe their action-directed approach has several advantages. Humphrey & Laidlaw challenge a common anthropological assumption that ritual is essentially a form of communication which enables people to express religious beliefs, symbolic codes, theories about societies, and other social messages. In their view, anthropologists have defined ritual by contextual and discursive elements, rather than focusing on what constitutes the marrow of rituals: human action. Their accomplishment is to deconstruct ritual to the minimal unit of action, which then is analyzed in relation to other components, like intentions and meanings, in the doing of action.

Linguistic actions, such as reading prayers, reciting religious texts, and singing songs, appear to be clear-cut examples of communication. But according to Humphrey & Laidlaw, this communication is not intrinsic to the *ritualized* nature of linguistic acts because ritualization is a quality which action assumes and not a conveyance of a set of ideas. Applying this idea to religious Sikh practices one can easily discover communicative functions and meanings of reciting the Gurus' words and teaching in the Guru Granth Sahib. Many contemporary Sikhs would explain that

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<sup>71</sup> Schieffelin (1998) argues that Humphrey & Laidlaw's theory cannot lay claims on general validity since it is empirically based on one type of ritual and excludes a large number of other ritual activities (Schieffelin 1998: 196). Cavallin (2005) suggests that Humphrey & Laidlaw's theory presents a paradox between the ritual commitment and the non-intentional quality of ritualized acts. In his reading, the ritual commitment is an "*intentional* suspension of individual intentionality" (2005: 7), when ritualized acts are no longer constituted by intentional meaning of the agent. As Cavallin argues, the ritual commitment can be interpreted to function as an overarching intentional meaning of the whole ritual performance, but if intentional meaning (of the ritual commitment) and intentions (of acts) should be regarded synonymous, then the theory becomes contradictory. In other words, the individual intention cannot be separated from the constitution of ritualized act since there is an intentional meaning behind the ritual commitment (Cavallin 2005: 7 ff.). A significant aspect of Humphrey & Laidlaw's theory, which Cavallin does not attend, is stipulation of ritual acts. From my reading of Humphrey & Laidlaw's theory, I believe the subtle distinction between intentions which identify acts and "prior" intentions (or motives and purposes) which spur people to engage in action, has created scholarly confusion of ideas. In cases of ritualization the latter type of "intention" may still provide meaning to ritual action, but none of the "intentions" identify ritual acts because they are perceived to be *stipulated*. Stipulation accomplishes the divorce with the actor's immediate intention and presents the act as distinct and ready-made. What makes it possible to discern instances of ritualization is how people describe the conduct of these stipulated acts (rather than theories about the reasons and meanings of the acts) and, if possible, demonstrate them in bodily action. Through observations of the formal properties of marked-out action and events we can identify stipulation and discover processes of ritualization. People who take part in these stipulated acts may apprehend the action with their bodies "without thinking". By engaging in the act, which they perform with their bodies, they make a ritual commitment more as a "performative thinking" rather than a consciousness decision in the conceptual sense (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 136).

their respect for the divine nature of the words forces a strict formality of any rendering of the sacred text. What can be ritual about recitations from the Sikh scripture, however, are neither the sacred words rendered nor the fact that the act of reciting accomplishes communication, but the manner and ways by which Sikhs conduct these recitations. Only the form of action can ritualize. While some Sikh recitation forms display solely formal features, others have assumed a ritualized character, in the sense that there is only one stipulated way to conduct a recitation and all who intend to do so will accept that sanctioned form.

Thus, when people join together in a ritual activity they engage in an already prescribed form of action regardless of their personal or social shared reasons for participating. All Sikhs entering a gurdwara are expected to perform *matha tekna*, the customary bowing before the installed Sikh scripture. Visitors may generally consider it a basic act of expressing reverence to the Guru, but irrespective of their own individual feelings and desires (e.g. presenting a wish, expressing devotion, doing what others do, following a tradition) in the moment of doing *matha tekna*, the formal feature of the act remains the same. The prescribed form is not affected by the interior dispositions of people, nor does it change if visitors will make mistakes or neglect the rule.

The action-directed approach makes it somewhat problematic to treat larger events, which anthropologists traditionally have classified as “rites of passage”, “calendric rites” or “rites of affliction”, as rituals per se. A wedding celebration, sometimes spanning over several days and weeks, constitutes a much larger structure or context in which many different acts may take place. To find a coalitional term for the spectrum of acts conducted during an event like a wedding, Habbe (2005) suggests one should speak of “formalized practice” – a practice that has adopted a formal character and within which people may enact different acts with various degrees of ritualization and formalization.<sup>72</sup> From this analytical perspective some activities which, at first, are deemed as having distinct ritualized features cannot always be categorized as rituals but are practices which merely include or display ritual elements. The single performance of *matha tekna* and many of the acts carried out in the daily Sikh liturgies, for instance, present a high degree of ritualization, while other worship acts in the Sikh religious life, such as devotional singing (*kirtan*) and staged enactments of social service (*seva*), are formal practices with ritualized components incorporated.

Another significant, and sometimes neglected, aspect of Humphrey & Laidlaw’s theory concerns the attribution of meaning to ritualized action. There seem to be definite proof that individuals and religious traditions find ritual and formal acts profoundly meaningful and sometimes carefully convey, to themselves and to others,

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<sup>72</sup> Habbe mentions five different types of acts in formalized practice: ordinary acts, rule-governed acts, ritualized acts, symbolic acts and ceremonial acts. During a wedding people may thus enact all the five types of action within the framework of one and the same event (Habbe 2005: 48).

their reasons and motives for engaging in these activities. At the same time the ritual theory maintains that ritual acts are non-intentional and have no intrinsic meaning. The point Humphrey & Laidlaw want to make, and which I will return to in the final chapter, is that people individually and collectively construct meanings of rituals from outside discourses in the tradition and society and the contexts in which the action is taking place. Because ritual acts are regarded external to the actor “they are ‘apprehensible’, waiting to be acted out in different modes and given symbolic meanings by the celebrants.”<sup>73</sup> Ritual action displays a readiness for assimilating divergent meanings, whether these are personal motives and purposes for conducting acts, representations of religious beliefs and ideas, collective interpretations expressed in narrative accounts, conventionalized social functions of the performance, or sensations and feelings which the acts are said to arouse in humans. People unite in the enactment of ritual performances, but the meanings which they bring with them and ascribe to the events are both culturally defined and shared as well as individually disparate and changing, since people have their own experiences, understandings, and desires for conducting ritual acts. This fragmentation of meanings, encountered by fieldworkers including myself, is not an ethnographic problem to smoothen over or erase, but a possibility that lies within ritual actions: the stipulated form of ritual makes it open for the attribution of plural meanings and thus the ritual can become “meaningful” in a many different subjective and collective ways.

#### SEARCH AND RESEARCH

The field work in Varanasi, which this study is based on, was conducted between the years 1999 and 2001, and appended with shorter revisits in 2004 and 2005. In total the length of my stays in India comprises about three years, out of which 25 months were spent in Varanasi for field studies and collection of data. When I arrived in 1999 neither city nor the Sikh community was new to me. Already in 1996 I made a two month-long field study for my undergraduate studies at Karlstad University. The initial weeks of this stay took care of the mandatory cultural shock for a European visiting a crowded Hindu pilgrimage center. The first impression of the urban environment – the vital religious life with ascetics and pilgrims along the riverbanks of Ganga, the streets and bazaars thronged with salesmen, colorful shrines and temples in endless variations, and the daily life with constant power cuts, water shortage, and the smell of fire-smoke, diesel, incense, and cow-dung in a delightful mixture – overloaded the senses for a few days. My first experiences of Varanasi have remained an amusing memory, but the perspection of time provided understanding of how one’s own identity and perceptions of a culture are continually changing as one enters new social fields and interacts with people. Ethnographic fieldwork can be likened to a process of socialization.<sup>74</sup> The student goes through a personal process, from a

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<sup>73</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 227.

<sup>74</sup> See e.g. Tedlock 2000: 458.

stranger who may experience alienation at the beginning but is slowly integrated into a new culture and establishes personal relations to people with whom he or she will eventually share experiences.

During my first visit in 1996 I began to participate in Sikh practices and made acquaintance with devotees related to the two main gurdwaras in Varanasi – Nichibagh Gurdwara (also called *Bari Sangat*) and Gurubagh Gurdwara. The following year I returned for a ten months long stay at Varanasi and Mussoorie to pursue studies in the Hindi and Punjabi languages and to seize an opportunity, alone and in the company of friends, to visit Sikh centers in the states of Punjab and Bihar. My main purpose for the journeys was to gain knowledge of the Sikh religion and the Punjabi culture as it was lived in order to identify a theme and topic for future research. The travels gave valuable experiences and I was able to establish contacts with families who became close friends in the years to come.

My field work for the present study was divided into two phases: In 1999 I interviewed Sikh performers affiliated to Nichibagh Gurdwara and Gurubagh Gurdwara and participated in public ceremonies to document religious practices in collectively shared spaces. In 2000 – 2001 I continued with these studies, but shifted focus to religious worship among lay people in their domestic spheres. The group of informants from whom I pursued the basic data for this survey comprises 38 employees in the gurdwaras at Varanasi (including *granthis*, *ragis*, *sevadars* and administrative personnel), 16 individuals responsible for educational and propaganda activities in and around the city (*kathakars* and *pracharaks*), and 35 active laypersons and members of different Sikh families. I also interviewed about 30 individuals about particular rituals and religious institutions. In addition I have conversed with an infinite number of Sikhs and Hindus at Varanasi and elsewhere. My field data also consists of collected newspaper articles, prayer books, religious pamphlets, as well as my own video- and audio recordings of Sikh ceremonies and a substantial collection of photographs portraying the Sikh religious life at Varanasi and the Punjab.

During the field studies I resided at the Swedish Study Center (Ganga Mahal), which Karlstad University has established beside river Ganga at Assi Ghat in the southern area of Varanasi. At the beginning of the field work in 1999 I considered staying inside the gurdwara complex to be able to follow the daily routines more closely. Like other Sikh shrines the gurdwaras offer free lodging to visiting pilgrims and travelers, but only for a maximum of three days. When I consulted the gurdwara personnel on this matter I sensed they were less enthusiastic about the idea of housing and, in their view, taking responsibility for a female foreigner. Some English speaking middle class families in the city invited me to stay at their joint household but I declined their offers on the basis that I would place myself in a dependant position to a few individuals of a high social position. In the long run this could negatively influence interviews with other families. In conversations with a few well-to-do families I also intuited that their purpose for inviting a foreigner to the house was to demonstrate a modern life style with “Western” connections to the surrounding soci-

ety.<sup>75</sup> Instead I made the study center at Assi Ghat a temporary home where I was allowed time to reflect upon experiences at the end of the day.

Throughout my field work at Varanasi I was assisted by Ajay Kumar who studied at Benares Hindu University and worked additionally as a field coordinator for the study center. His remarkable social skills and profound knowledge of local cultures have considerably contributed to the study. Although Ajay Kumar belonged to a Hindu family, he always paid the greatest respect to the Guru Granth Sahib and was eager to learn more about the Sikh religion. Within only a couple of weeks he pursued knowledge in the Gurmukhi script and was able to understand inscriptions and notices in the gurdwara. Especially during the first part of my field work, when my language knowledge was frail, Ajay Kumar participated in all interviews and translated conversations from Hindi to English. Our extended cooperation provided linguistic and social stability to my work, in the sense that we got to know each others' language usages and behaviors, and informants were comfortable about having both of us around.

#### EXPERIENCES THROUGH PRACTICE

Ethnographers may adopt different attitudes in the field depending upon their individual personality, capacities, and purposes of the study. The classic keyword for the working method commonly used by ethnographers – “participant observation” – has been interpreted differently over times and generated interesting discussions on the researcher's role in the field. On a general level anthropologists have distinguished between the more silent observer and the active participant – two positions which have come to represent two much wider ideals of objective and subjective research. According to the former position the ideal ethnographer attempts to remain “invisible” in field in order to maintain an objective approach and not lose the analytic perspective. The latter ideal, predominant in reflexive anthropology, takes for granted that all researchers have intellectual, bodily, and sensual experiences in the field and will provide subjective interpretations whether they like or not. Advocates of the latter ideal will purport that scholars should take use of their personal subjectivity in the process of doing field work and writing academic presentations, instead of creating homogenized ethnographies that reflect a false objectivity.<sup>76</sup>

In concrete field work situations, however, the two categories of observer and participant are more closely related and overlap, since the ethnographer, like other human beings with bodies moving about in spaces, cannot escape herself to “objec-

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<sup>75</sup> In interactions with one middle-class family it became apparent that their invitation implied I “repay” them by getting their eldest son admitted to a college in Europe and bringing expensive consumer articles that I was of no financial position to retrieve. The *granthis* of gurdwara were apparently aware of existing prejudices about European foreigners as being “wealthy” and on several occasions countered this preconception by publicly and correctly introducing me as a student surviving on educational grants.

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. Davies 1999.

tively" observe phenomena without exerting influences and being influenced by the surrounding context. The degrees to which an ethnographer observes or participates in activities of the people of study also differ in field situations. In my own documentation of city processions (*Nagar kirtan*) of Guru Granth Sahib, for example, I was sometimes a spectator, observing and video recording the Sikh procession winding its way through the streets, together with Hindu and Muslim inhabitants of Varanasi. In the next moment I was invited to be a member of the procession, walking together with the women singing hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. Whichever way one chooses to understand and describe the term "participant observation" it remains that a fieldworker cannot avoid being a part of the contexts within which he or she is dwelling.

An alternative term and approach, suggested by Olsson (2000), is to gain "insights through participation", or "experience through practice". The fieldworker participates in practices on the same conditions as other participants and positions herself as a student or a disciple to the person or group of study. Being a student, as Olsson writes, it to place oneself in a humble and inferior position in relation to the informants and may provide valuable understanding of the ways by which religious knowledge and practices are transmitted.<sup>77</sup> The method implies a move away from the referential bias of positivistic ethnographic practices – one asks people for "facts" and assumes they will provide straight answers – towards willingness on part of the fieldworker to be engaged in another life-world and learn from experiences shared with others.<sup>78</sup> This more reflexive line of research can be fruitfully approached by participation as well as observation.

My own "method" to become a "student" came naturally in social interactions with Sikhs at Varanasi and was not a decision propelled by anthropological theories. Anyone who participates in worship within the sacred space of a gurdwara is in fact considered to be a student or a "Sikh" (from the Sanskrit word *shishya* meaning disciple or learner) in presence of the holy congregation and the Guru enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib. To become a regular member, as far as this was possible, I spent considerable time during the first part of my field work on participation in the daily morning and evening liturgies, festivals, and other public activities in the gurdwara. My own credibility among devotees within this sacred space was a basic requirement for establishing the needed social network. As I soon realized, this credibility was not related to the fact that I was a university student in religious studies – something that probably would open a few doors in my own country – but my way of showing respect to the Guru Granth Sahib by observing stipulated acts before the scripture and, more or less, imitate the dress codes and behaviors which imply dignity in the Punjabi culture. A respectful attitude towards the Sikh Guru became the key to build up social relationships with informants. Much later one *granthi* in gurdwara made a passing note that he personally decided to let me attend all his duties only after he

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<sup>77</sup> Olsson 2000a: 19.

<sup>78</sup> Barnekow 2003: 181.



had witnessed and confirmed that I paid due respect to the Guru Granth Sahib. To pursue studies in the Sikh religion was, in his and others' view, primarily to engage in the Gurus' teaching and congregational activities, from which I would morally and spiritually progress. Lay people would similarly judge my presence and identity in the community on my behavior in the gurdwara. On several occasions visitors would come up to tell me they had seen the devotion "white" (*ghora*) Sikhs, or followers of Yogi Bhajan, were expressing at Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar. This, I interpreted, was their way to pay compliments and connect with a new "disciple" not born into the Sikh religion. The studentship also resulted in social incorporation into kinship structures of a few families. A common strategy in India to verify pure intentions with close and trusting relationships, especially friendship with the opposite sex, is to address friends with kinship categories used in social life. Gradually I became the grand daughter, daughter, sister, and aunt to friends who provided me personal support and guidance besides teaching religion.

To participate in the same conditions as the people of study implies that the documentation of religious practices cannot always follow the systematic pattern one sometimes wishes would unfold. The daily liturgies in the gurdwara, festivals, and other communal programs are fixed events and fairly easy to schedule, but life-cycle events like birth, marriage, and death, one must necessarily take as they come. Yet most Sikh ceremonies related to the life stages are conducted in the gurdwara. I was therefore able to partake in a large number of weddings and death ceremonies of both known and unknown individuals just by dwelling within that space. After I had made friends in the community families also began to invite me to engagement parties, weddings, turban ceremonies, memorial services to ancestors, and other family arrangements. Another strategy to learn about life-cycle events was initiated by the *granthis*, who invited me to accompany them and document their religious duties at the cremation ground, hospitals, and homes. The only event I was not allowed to partake in was the Khalsa initiation (*khande di pahul*), since the ceremony is open only to neophytes who intend to live by the Khalsa discipline.

#### CONVERSATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

During a field work the ethnographer continually interacts, speaks and exchanges ideas with diverse people in various types of conversations. Most of the conversations on religion and culture which I had with different Sikh interlocutors emerged more spontaneously at a motley variety of places – inside the gurdwara after a religious program, at the railway station while waiting for train, after a death ceremony at the cremation ghat, in the shop drinking tea, or at a reception party for a newly wedded couple.

In general, field workers categorize interviews after the degree to which the interview situation and the structure and standardization of the questions are organized. Ordinary conversations conducted in the different situations can be termed "unstructured interviews" as the ethnographer may steer the conversation into a certain topic of discussion, but both parties develop dialogues freely within the

frames of a speech event. At the other end of the continuum are “structured” interviews when the fieldworker uses standard questionnaires with prepared questions often presented to a larger number of respondents in order to gain data for quantitative analyses. A middle way is “semi-structured interviews” which take use of an interview guide but let the questions be open-ended in order to encourage the respondent to make personal reflections and develop ideas. In semi-structured interviews the order of words and questions may alter with attendant questions added depending upon the course of the conversation and the interview situation. This method normally presumes a trustful relationship between the ethnographer and the individual interviewee.

At the beginning of my field studies I considered a questionnaire with a large number of Sikh devotees affiliated to the gurdwaras for the aim of gathering data which could provide statistics on religious behaviors and worship routines.<sup>79</sup> In test interviews, however, both my interlocutors and I felt uncomfortable with this rather impersonal method, by some informants perceived to be a “test” in their knowledge of religion. The structured interviews frequently collapsed when our discussions took quite a different direction than what I had envisaged when the standard questionnaire was formulated after my pre-conceived ideas of what would be significant to ask.

In interview discourses with different interlocutors in Varanasi I found the less constrained unstructured interview form most rewarding as the method greatly allows interlocutors to develop ideas, arguments, and use a wider range of discursive forms according to their own choosing. Many would interpret the interview situations from the framework of a traditional “teacher – student” relationship, in which I assumed the role as the student seeking knowledge from senior tutors.<sup>80</sup> To sit down, ask questions, and listen to the answers of informants are just as much an attitude as

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<sup>79</sup> In 1999 I also made a failed attempt to use a formal written questionnaire. On the day celebrating Guru Nanak’s birthday devotees from all over Varanasi district were expected to gather in Gurubagh Gurdwara. To reach out to Sikhs who were not regular visitors I decided to distribute five hundred pre-stamped questionnaires, approved by gurdwara manager, on this day. The form contained a short introduction of my work, a few standardized questions, and an invitation to participate in interviews. As the devotees were pouring out of from the gurdwara complex after the customary serving of food from the communal kitchen (*langar*), I and two other students handed out the papers. At first we were content that most seemed to accept the questionnaire gladly. However, when we exited the gurdwara our optimism took another turn. The street was virtually covered with white sheets. Most who received the questionnaire had apparently thrown it away as soon as they realized the content. Of all papers distributed that day only ten Sikhs (of whom seven were women) responded by returning the question sheet to the *granthi*. From this experience I learnt that the formal questionnaire investigation is not a rewarding method in this context.

<sup>80</sup> An elderly Udasin monk affiliated to a monastery (*akhara*) in Assi formalized the teacher-student relationship. For two weeks in a row we scheduled interviews at 9 in the morning. Everyday he would spread out a straw mattress outside his room at the *akhara*, offer a cup of tea, and then for two hours recite the story of the Udasin tradition from a printed book.

a method, which implies patience, humility, respect and learning on part of the student. Throughout my field work I used this method, especially for interviews with performers attached to the gurdwaras and other key informants. The flexible interviews frequently developed to in-depth conversations extending over several hours. At other times short conversations emerged spontaneously, often as commentaries to ceremonies and acts performed. The free-formed method allowed the interlocutors to decide the time and place for the interviews and give directions for which type of discussions they felt most comfortable with. Seated in the gurdwara the performers, for instance, would let me choose the general topics of discussions and then develop interpretations in an instructive manner. The *granthis* in particular felt at ease to explain details of religious ceremonies and thus continually provided valuable commentaries to practices I observed and took part of. The *granthis* were frequently interrupted by visiting devotees who requested them to read prayers and present offerings to the Guru Granth Sahib. Temporarily they would leave the interview situation to enact the acts before the installed scripture. Afterwards they returned, often in company with the visitors, to explain what had just been performed. The themes brought up for discussion by the employees and performers in the gurdwara often became the subject for the next interview. I evoked many topics for discussion at different occasions in order to double check my own interpretations and to see how explanations were changing between individuals and conversational situations.

Anthropologists frequently pay attention to the tendency of informants to present public representations of religious ideas and practices instead of conveying personal views. Informants may shape discourses to their own preconceptions of the field worker's identity and what he or she should be told.<sup>81</sup> Self-appointed experts may even meet the field worker with great skepticism and find his or her inquiries political, misleading, or irrelevant. During my first visits in the Varanasi congregation I was regularly directed to elder men regarded "knowledgeable", such as the adherents of the Nirmala order who were said to hold authoritative knowledge to talk about Sikhism. The gurdwara employees also staged several meetings with male interlocutors who had pursued university degrees and were fluent in the English language. The selection of these interviewees was a matter of representing the Sikh tradition to an inquiring outsider, presumed to have no previous knowledge. For hours I would listen to stories about Guru Nanak as the "founder" of the Sikh religion, the creation of Khalsa, and other acknowledged stories, while my inquiries relating to contemporary issues were either ignored or politely explained away. The tendency to repeat public stories and overlook questions outside the dominant discourse was typical of male interlocutors of high prestige. Women with less social status to protect would, contrastingly, talk unrestrainedly about family matters and their private worship. Only when the rather formal acquaintance transformed into personal social relationships – I got to know about their families and lives and they about mine – the content and frames of conversations with both male and female interlocutors

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<sup>81</sup> See e.g. Haring 1972.

changed direction. This change illustrated how discursive materials are continually negotiated depending upon changing roles and motivations of the participants exchanging views.

To gain insights of domestic Sikh practices I conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 “active” community members in 2000 – 2001. At the beginning I intended to restrict these interviews to families residing in a specific neighborhood of Varanasi or a particular social group within the community. To be able to compare, at least to myself, the collective worship inside the gurdwara and practices in the private sphere I decided to encircle a group of individuals who were locally categorized as “active” in the congregational life.<sup>82</sup> The criterion of inclusion was primarily based on the degree to which people participated in communal activities and visited the gurdwara with regularity. From previous visits I knew families who often assumed responsibility for religious programs. The head *granthi* of Gurubagh Gurdwara assisted me further by identifying individuals which he perceived as “true” devotees with regular worship routines. The *granthi* became a significant intermediary link to get in contact with other families I knew only by sight. On their way out of the gurdwara he would virtually catch a hold of a potential informant to introduce my project and ask him or her to invite me over. More than half of the participants in the semi-structured interviews agreed to enter interviews on his request and credentials.

In order to collect voices from both male and female devotees of different ages I divided the interviewees into three categories of age groups with younger (19 – 35 years), middle-aged (36 – 55 years), and elder (56 – 75 years) people. Beforehand I decided that participants in the different age groups should not belong to the same household since I aimed to map out different family practices. At the beginning the ambition was to interview a larger and somewhat representative number of informants. This, however, turned out to be more difficult to achieve in practice. Typically middle-aged men and women in trading occupations were active in the congregational life and obligingly accepted to talk about their religious beliefs and practices. Young women and men, on the other hand, were occupied with studies or preferred to dedicate their time to other interests. Only a few individuals in this age group were keen on discussing matters related to religion. The absence of younger people in the gurdwara, particularly women, was a source of ambivalence within the community. Discussions as to how this situation had come about raised issues regarding the penetration of cheap entertainments and new technologies of communication in the society. One of the *granthis* said younger women are not active because they prefer to stay home and watch satellite TV and Bollywood films. This was, in his view, a serious threat to their moral and spiritual development. Elderly women were similarly fewer in congregational activities because of age-related problems or traditional gender

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<sup>82</sup> “Active” is unquestionably an ambiguous classification that implicitly carries unfortunate evaluations (“active” as compared to “inactive”). In this survey the criteria and value for being “active” rested on people’s regular participation and action in collective worship, which was subjectively judged by local proponents of normative values.

division which grants women an active role in domestic spheres but not in the public. Elderly female interlocutors would sometimes let the man of the household speak on behalf of the whole family. In one interview the husband dominantly took over the discussion, while the woman retreated into complete silence. The tendency to give men precedence of speech was present in conversations with informants of other age groups, but never posed any major problem as men and women were conversed with separately.

The interview guide developed around themes regarded significant to a Sikh way of life. In total it contained fifty questions, including biographical data of the interviewee. A first group of questions were used to obtain data on the religious identity and language proficiency of the interviewee, as well as his or her perceptions of Sikh history and means to pursue religious knowledge. A second cluster of questions focused on religious space in Varanasi, particularly the gurdwara and the practices conducted therein. The interlocutor was requested to describe personal worship routines and explicate collective worship acts in the gurdwara, such as *kirtan*, *seva*, *simran*. A third group of questions concerned conceptions and practices of the Guru Granth Sahib and hymns ascribed to the Sikh Gurus. The interviewee was asked to explain various personal uses of the Sikh scripture at the private house and in the gurdwara. The fourth set of questions involved different types of religious practices, such as pilgrimage, festivals, rites of passage, calendar rites, practices in times of illness and need, which the interviewees were asked to describe from personal experiences. In a final group of questions the interlocutor was encouraged to develop personal religious beliefs and meanings of devotion. In every interview several follow-up questions were added to the conversation. The length of time I spent with each informant comprised from three to more than twenty hours. I would therefore meet each interlocutor between one to five times, excluding social visits and small talks to make our acquaintances. Most of the interviews were conducted at private houses and shops or in the gurdwara. At the end of the each interview the informant were asked to bring up themes and topics they considered relevant for a Sikh identity and a Sikh way of life which he or she thought we had omitted in our conversations.

At the beginning of my field study the *granthis* and the gurdwara manager granted permission to use a tape recorder to document liturgies and performances inside the gurdwara. The semi-structured interviews with Sikh individuals and most unstructured interviews with performers were also recorded on tape. The accumulation of material and lack of time prevented me from transcribing the interviews to English during my stay at Varanasi. Instead I kept notes and transcribed all recordings when I returned home. In interview situations all informants were firstly asked if they approved of being recorded. Provided they agreed, I would keep the tape recorder in my bag with a small microphone attached outside to avoid making the rolling tape a disturbing factor. Only in one case did the son-in-law of an elderly male respondent ask me to switch off the recorder because he considered the information conveyed politically charged. In conversations with others I experienced that people would be somewhat reserved at the beginning of our conversation, but

quickly relaxed and remained rather unconcerned with the presence of a microphone. A middle-aged man did in fact bless me for having his voice recorded and used in a fruitful way. In his view the interview became a meritorious discourse on God and the Sikh Gurus, in other words, an act of worship eternalized on tape.

## ONE



# THE SIKHS IN VARANASI IN SEARCH OF HISTORY

As an ancient city of religious learning and pilgrimage, Varanasi – also called Kashi and Banaras – is considered to be a microcosmos of the sacred landscape of India, crammed with religious shrines and temples, sacred ponds and trees, and the river Ganga framing the city on its eastern border. For centuries the picturesque city has been reputed for preserving traditional Hinduism and ancient religious wisdom. According to *Kashi Khanda*, a section of the Skanda Purana, Shiva and his consort Parvati created Vishnu who performed austerities in Varanasi for 50000 years to construct the universe. Shiva was so delighted by his work that in excitement he dropped one of his earrings on the bank of river Ganga. From the boon Shiva gave to Vishnu he promised that Varanasi would always bestow liberation, and this makes only one of the many reasons as to why Hindu pilgrims flock to the city, especially at the time of death.<sup>83</sup> In the ear of any person dying in Varanasi Shiva will whisper a salvific spell which wards off the Messenger of Death (*Yama*) and grants release from the cycle of birth and death.

Varanasi is also a destination of pilgrimage for the Sikhs but for quite different reasons: the city has been blessed by the physical presence of the first, ninth and the tenth Sikh Guru – Nanak, Tegh Bahadur and Gobind Singh – and it is the place where the saint poets Kabir and Ravidas, whose hymns are included in Guru Granth Sahib, resided. Every Sikh tourist, trader or pilgrim who is visiting the city or just passing by on the way to Patna Sahib in Bihar, Punjab or some other destination, will quickly realize that the two main Sikh gurdwaras sheltered in the city – Nichibagh and Gurbagh – stand on historical ground. The gurdwaras are classified as “historical” (*itihāsik*) – a fact that modern handbooks on Sikh shrines in India promptly will confirm.<sup>84</sup> As local Sikhs narrate their past, the history of the community begins with Guru Nanak’s first travel eastwards from Sultanpur towards Dakkan. Accompanied by his companion musician, Mardana, Guru Nanak reached Varanasi in 1506 CE (*samat* 1563) during *Shivratri*, the festival celebrating lord Shiva’s wedding night with Parvati. Upon seeing the beautiful scenery in the outskirts of Varanasi Guru Nanak

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<sup>83</sup> The mythology of Varanasi and the various social and religious aspects of death and dying in the city, according to its dominating Hindu paradigm, have been thoroughly documented by scholars. See Vidhyarthi 1979, Eck 1993, Parry 1994, Justice 1997.

<sup>84</sup> Gurmukh Singh 1995: 319 – 321, Randhir 1990: 72 – 73.

requested Mardana to tune his rebeck from which the name of the divine Creator (*Kartar*) started to resound throughout the sky. The present Gurubagh Gurdwara, located in the area of Kamaccha on Luxa road two kilometers from the city centre in a westerly direction, has preserved a small garden in the courtyard as a memento of the “seat” that Guru Nanak occupied in Varanasi and the land which learned scholars of Kashi bestowed him after he had sung sacred hymns and defeated them in religious debates. Amidst whitewashed brick buildings and concrete walls of the crowded townscape, a small plot decorated with green grass, roses and French marigolds brings forth visual imagery of the greenery of jujube, guava, bamboo, tamarind and *nim* trees that once provided the beauty of the Guru’s garden.

The local history about the Gurus’ visit and the genesis of a Sikh community in Varanasi is today conveyed orally and in writing. A pilgrim visiting any of the two gurdwaras is likely to be provided a ritualized rendering of the history. After the customary washing of hands and feet when visiting a gurdwara, the pilgrim should first enter the sacred space and bow down before the throne on which Guru Granth Sahib is installed. Subsequently the *granthi* or some other attendant lets the pilgrim be seated on a sheet outside the doorway to the inner sanctum. In a recitative manner the *granthi* will start to narrate the historical events from his memory and point out the relics and spaces in the gurdwara for the pilgrim to observe and pay respect to. The formalized oration provides historical legitimacy to the places and instructions on the ritual behavior in the gurdwara. Like most Sikh events the *granthi* will conclude his narration by uttering the Khalsa salutation (*Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki fateh*) and offer the pilgrim *prashad*, consecrated food from the Guru’s place.

The history retold is a modern reconstruction of anecdotes primarily anchored in local legends and the seventeenth century *Janam-sakhi* literature, hagiographies on



The local history painted in frames at Gurubagh Gurdwara



the life and deeds of Guru Nanak. Today the history has become scripturalized in a booklet titled “Some Historical Recollections of Varanasi” in the Punjabi version, and “The Historical Gurdwaras of Varanasi” in Hindi with an English translation appended. Neither the editor nor publication year is mentioned in the small history book, but to all appearances the managing committee of the two gurdwaras printed it in the 1990s. At request of the pilgrim, he or she will be offered a free copy of the booklet as a religious souvenir from the holy city of Kashi. If for some reason the local history cannot be orally rendered to pilgrims, abbreviated versions of the stories have been painted in Gurmukhi script on framed boards attached to the wall of the main entrances of two gurdwaras – in Gurubagh the wall inscription tells about Guru Nanak’s visit in 1506 and in Nichibagh about Guru Tegh Bahadur’s stay in Varanasi in 1666. Just like the *granthi*, other Sikhs had committed the stories to memory, at least a few anecdotes or the essential outline, which they communicate to children, visitors and whenever the need to report history occurs. Although there are no satisfactory historical sources to testify exactly what happened during the Gurus’ visits in Varanasi, the events make a part of the collective memory of a meaningful past that affirms the importance of religious places and a community in the present.

When I began my first fieldwork in Varanasi in 1999 my objective was to combine the anthropological approach with a search for historical documents to reconstruct the historical context of the Sikh community in Varanasi. Today it appears almost commonsensical for students in anthropology to contextualize cultural analyses of the religious community, social group, or institution of study within a historical framework. In order to provide holistic understanding of the local Sikh community and institutions, I intended to do the same. If the initial goal would turn out to be impractical, my intent was to find at least some pieces of source material to sketch the local history, or at the very least shed some light on the last decades. The ambition brought me to a number of libraries and archives in Varanasi district, which offered valuable experiences of archival work, even if the search for textual sources proved less fruitful. Varanasi is a city associated with a Hindu population and not the Sikhs. Apart from access to Census reports and a few district Gazetteers at the library at Benares Hindu University, the Regional Archive in Sigra, and assessments lists of tax on buildings at Maha Palika (Municipal Corporation), textual material on the Sikhs were few or inaccessible.<sup>85</sup> As the paucity of historical accounts slowly begun to cloud my initial goals I had started to collect oral accounts on the local history from a selected number of community members. Their stories made me question my own preconceived notions of history (as some kind of systematic evaluation and analysis of source material to construct a description of events and institutions) when I ventured into the field and drew my attention closer to basic anthropological queries related to indigenous conceptions of history and historiography: which history is

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<sup>85</sup> Nita Kumar (1992) has revealingly described the challenges of gaining access to local archives in Varanasi.

being told? What does history mean to local people? How does peoples' history reflect current concerns?

The majority of Sikhs arrived in the city during the years surrounding the partition in 1947 either as migrant traders or refugees from Western Punjab in the present Pakistan. In extended conversations my interlocutors surfaced fragments of information about their arrival in India, experiences of the resettlement in Varanasi, the reconstruction of gurdwara buildings and how communal practices were revitalized – all of which constitute memory histories that will scatter in the sections of this chapter. The important “history” they had internalized and held memorable, however, was not systematic analyses of source material but a history that celebrates and verifies the Guru’s presence and wonders at Varanasi. In response to my insistent inquiries about historical accounts a middle-aged Sikh woman and a good friend of mine handed over the booklet with the history of the gurdwaras and simply said: “If you read and listen to this, then you will know the whole history and need not to seek anymore.” The local history of the gurdwaras and the community worked as a meta-commentary to social histories about the adventures and hardship of individual families. It embodied a relation to a meaningful past and revealed the self-image of a collective group and identity at a particular location. Re-telling anecdotes about the Sikh Gurus became the way to tell the history about oneself.

Today it appears fairly trite to state that remembering or forgetting the past is inherently a social activity, executed in a dynamic interplay between individuals and social groups, and that collectors of the past – historians, communities, or others – in different cultures and times find either corresponding or contradicting aspects of history memorable and consequently produce differing representations of the past. Already in the 1920s Maurice Halbwach argued that memory must be understood from a social framework: social groups construct memories and select what in the past should be “memorable”. Individuals do remember things from the past, but there is no requirement that they have had a direct experience of the historical event. Instead the social group determines what should be remembered and how, in other words, the group creates a “collective memory”, with which individuals identify themselves. Halbwach distinguished between “written history”, which in his positivist view signified the objective and textual reconstruction of the past, and “collective memory”, which was a product of social life and exposed to changes according to the needs of societies.<sup>86</sup>

Contemporary historians, anthropologists and other social scientists would hardly agree with Halbwach’s polarization between collective memory and written history, but rather treat both as products of social groups. Scholars who have attempted to move away from the earlier rationalistic and positivist ethos accentuate that the important task in the study of collective memory is not so much to prove historical factuality of social recollections – how they actually tally with a past reality – but in which ways individuals and groups remember, select and construct memo-

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<sup>86</sup> Halbwachs 1992.

ries and how these processes are instrumental in serving political, social or cultural aims of individuals, communities and even nations.<sup>87</sup> In a paper titled “History as Social Memory”, Burke (1989) briefs a few theoretical questions to take into consideration when studying how groups organize, what he labels “social memory” that is shared and remembered by a social group. In Burke’s view, social memory should be treated as a historical phenomenon on the same conditions as written records and documents, and this memory is transmitted through a variety of means, such as orally transmitted stories, art, architecture, rituals, habits and bodily acts. Burke highlights the existence of cultural perceptual categories or schemata through which people access the past. These schemas tend “to represent (or indeed to remember) one event or one person in terms of another”.<sup>88</sup> Stories from the *Janam-sakhi* literature are read or retold so often that they may organize people’s perceptions and memories; the stories offer cognitive prototypes on which people are able to structure their memory.

The collective memory is characterized by selection and reductionism, in the sense that contextual complexities are reduced to a few stereotypical incidents and selected persons esteemed significant to the culture which jointly will form a “sense” of the past when structured and attributed semantic meanings. Extraordinary persons, like the Sikhs Gurus, may even become “metonyms of history” as they embody and motivate processes which historians would ascribe to more dispersed causes.<sup>89</sup> The Gurus are the chief agents, staged at the centre with supernatural power to control actions and to whom all historical events are related and tied together. They are the main characters to whom a causal history is attributed.

As pointed out by many scholars, a community’s need to reconstruct and remember the past must be understood in much broader contexts of interplay between social, political and cultural interests and attitudes in the present. Quite often these constitutive processes occur in times of social and political upheavals, feelings of loss and uprootedness, when people experience an urgent need to articulate a relation to the past and create identity markers. To recreate and recurrently be involved in the retelling of one’s own history is certainly for the purpose of commemorating and not forgetting the past, but the transmission of collective memory carries contexts of meanings that aim to bridge continuity between the past and the present and turn people towards the future. What and in which way the past should be remembered become a machinery of social and political power: by controlling the past we actually try to regulate who we are at the present and will be in the future. In societies with multiple social and religious identities and rival histories co-existing, the collective memory helps people to define identity and distinguish “us” in relation to the “others”.<sup>90</sup> The ongoing contest between varying accounts of history – competition be-

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<sup>87</sup> See e.g. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Middleton & Edwards 1990.

<sup>88</sup> Burke 1989: 102.

<sup>89</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 38.

<sup>90</sup> Burke 1989: 107.

tween continuity and revision – also make people re-interpret and discover new features of the past that becomes the context and content for what they will remember and celebrate in the future.

The following chapter consists of three major sections. Based on the scanty sources available the first part will provide an overview of the history of the Sikhs at Varanasi and the social composition of the community at the present. The second part will acquaint the reader with different Sikh institutions and organizations which were operating in the city at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The last part of the chapter is more concerned with local historiography and will illustrate the ways by which contemporary Sikhs construct a meaningful history in writing and through the organization of relics and visual representations. This history contests the dominant Hindu narrative of Varanasi to make the agency and power of the Sikh Gurus perpetually present in the city.

### 1.1. SOCIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION

Varanasi is a city with more than a million inhabitants from different parts of India and presents a brocade of religious communities and cultures that daily interact and intermingle in various social spaces. According to the 2001 Census the Sikhs constitute a small minority of only 0.25 percent (3115 persons) of the total population in the urban areas of Varanasi district.<sup>91</sup> Local Sikhs maintain there are between 5000 to 10000 members of the community who reside in the city centre and neighboring towns and villages. An obvious explanation to the discrepancy between these estimations and the Census report is the fact that the community embraces not only people who are officially registered as Sikhs but adherents of other traditions who have faith in the Guru Granth Sahib and actively participate in the congregational life. The gurdwaras are all-inclusive spaces, open for all irrespective of social and religious belonging.<sup>92</sup> The daily worship and especially festivals celebrating the Sikh Gurus will attract a variety of devotees who would define their religious identity as Hindus, Muslims, or even state they are both Hindus and Sikhs if being asked. The composition of community members can therefore not be comprised in one single all-encompassing religious category of “Sikhs” that can be further subdivided according to the various degrees by which individuals observe the Khalsa discipline (See Chapter 2).

The urban reality with large numbers of inhabitants also offers a more fragmentary picture with social flux and motions than, for example, the traditional village setting. People are continually moving in and out of the city, they enter spaces and activities more or less as they like, and present fragmentary aspects of themselves in interaction with others who only know them as followers of a discrete religion or of a

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<sup>91</sup> *Census of India 2001.*

<sup>92</sup> In contrast to some Hindu temples and mosques in the city which, at least officially, only admit people from within their own fold.

particular ethnic background. The social composition of a large urban community will remain a knotty problem unless one recurs to one or another generalization.

Aware of these complexities the devotees who today constitute the bulk of the Sikh community in Varanasi can still be generalized into four main categories. In the first group are a small number of Sikh families who claim a history in the city. These families either assert they are descendents of the Brahmin pandits and the first disciples of Guru Nanak, or say they became residents of Varanasi more than a hundred and fifty years back because of trade, posts in governmental services, or other attractions in a Hindu pilgrimage centre. The second and undoubtedly the largest grouping are the Punjabi Sikhs who migrated from Western Punjab, Kashmir, and the North Western Provinces during the years surrounding the partition in 1947. The majority are Khatri traders and those who belong to some other Punjabi business community. Due to their financial standing and social status these families have come to occupy a position as patrons of the local community. They are in charge of the two gurdwaras in the city and responsible for public representations of Sikhism to the outside society. A third and often neglected group of the community is made up by low caste Hindus who in more recent years have converted to the Sikhism on religious motives and to escape caste discriminations. Most converts originate from rural areas in surrounding districts and Bihar and have settled in the Varanasi for job opportunities. Another influential group in the congregational life is the Sindhis, a community which traces its origin to the state Sindh in the present Pakistan and arrived in Varanasi after the partition. Sindhis have their own language, social system, culture, and have distinguished themselves as successful merchants. In terms of religious affiliation the Sindhis uphold an inclusive attitude: they are both Hindus and followers of the Sikh Gurus, and simultaneously maintain the cult of their patron Saint Jhulelal.

To illustrate the social and cultural diversity within a local community and how religious affiliations are negotiated and interpreted quite differently by the groups, the Khatri Sikhs, Hindu converts, and Sindhis will be discussed separately in the following. For Punjabi Sikhs, religion and identity will be intimately intertwined with a Punjabi culture, language, social customs, and ties to the homeland of Punjab, while the Sindhis take pride in the preservation of a Sindhi culture that marks out their ethnic identity and differentiates them from others. The converts, on the other hand, adopt the Sikh teaching and a Khalsa identity but will maintain customs of their origin. Out in the society, however, other residents of the city will associate them with a cultural and ethnical belonging to the Punjab because of the external Sikh symbols they wear.

#### GENESIS AND DEMOGRAPHY OF A COMMUNITY

In compliance with stories in the *Janam Sakhi* literature, the Sikhs in Varanasi will trace the birth of their congregation back to the sixteenth century when Guru Nanak visited Varanasi and converted Hindu *pandits*, learned scholars to the Sikh teaching. Nineteenth century Sikh sources claim that two followers of the Guru – Hari Lal and

Hari Krishan – did propaganda of Sikhism in Varanasi and later met with Guru Arjan in the Punjab to hand over Sanskrit hymns composed by Guru Nanak for inclusion in the Sikh scripture.<sup>93</sup>

During the reign of the ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur, in the late seventeenth century clearer references to the local congregation at Varanasi emerge. In the 1660s Guru Tegh Bahadur left the Punjab and set out on a long tour of Eastern India. At Patna, the present capital of Bihar, his son Govind Rai (later Gobind Singh) was born in 1666. The Guru's family came to live in the city for several years while the Guru was visiting devotees at different places. It seems that the congregation at Patna constituted the centre for a larger geographical diocese (*manji*) in the Eastern regions, including Sikh congregations at Varanasi and Mirzapur.<sup>94</sup>

It is said that Guru Tegh Bahadur stopped at Varanasi for seven months during his eastwards travel towards Patna in 1666. The *hukam-namas* or letters of the Guru, preserved at Nichibagh Gurdwara in Varanasi and at Patna Sahib, acquaint us with local disciples and their activities. Several of the letters addressed to the Varanasi congregation mention a Sikh named Bhai Jawehar Mal, who apparently worked as a local agent to collect donations from Sikh devotees in Varanasi and stayed in close contact with the Guru through the Sikhs at Patna Sahib.<sup>95</sup> In one letter Guru Tegh Bahadur writes: "let the congregation entrust to Bhai Jawehar their donations out of their earnings, which Jawehar shall convey to Bhai Dayal Das. These shall then be conveyed to the holy stores."<sup>96</sup> On behalf of the Sikhs in Varanasi Bhai Jawehar handed over offerings to the Guru through Bhai Dayal Das, who apparently worked as the head of the congregation at Patna.<sup>97</sup> Some representatives of the Varanasi Sikhs

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<sup>93</sup> The references are mentioned in *Suraj Prakash* by Bhai Santokh Singh from 1844 (See Gian Singh 2004) and Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's *Mahankosh* from 1930 (See Nabha 1996 (1930)).

<sup>94</sup> The late eighteenth century *Gurbilas Padshahi Das* of Bhai Sukha Singh tells us that Guru Gobind Singh supposedly selected and sent two *masands* – the Guru's nominees or agents in distant congregations – to Varanasi and others places in the eastern parts of India in order to collect tithes (Parkash 1981: 87). Guru Amardas organized the *masand* system to meet the demands of a growing and geographically dispersed Sikh community. The local *masands* worked as representatives of the Guru in different dioceses, with the main task to guide local Sikhs in religious matters, collect offerings and keep the local communities in touch with the Guru and Sikh headquarters. The deputies were responsible to the Guru for the organization within their dioceses and could appoint their own agents. Apparently the *masands* became corrupted. In a *hukam-nama* of 1701, preserved at Patna Sahib, Guru Gobind Singh ordered the Sikhs to avoid dealings with the *masands*. When the Guru created the *Khalsa* in 1699 the system was abolished (Parkash 1981: 88).

<sup>95</sup> In one *hukam-nama* Bhai Jawehar Mal is addressed "masand" (Fauja Singh 1996: 71).

<sup>96</sup> Fauja Singh 1996: 67.

<sup>97</sup> See Parkash 1981: 135. In one letter addressed to the congregation in Varanasi the Guru exhorts: "let Dayal Das's communication be obeyed by the Congregation as the Guru's own command" (Fauja Singh 1996: 71). The *hukam-namas* confirm that donations from the Varanasi congregation reached the Guru through the *masands*. One *hukam-nama* informs that Guru Tegh Bahadur received 80 rupees from the Sikhs in Varanasi by way of Bhai Dayal Das and according

appeared before Guru Tegh Bahadur when he camped at Monghyr. In one *hukam-nama* the Guru thanks a Sikh named Bhai Kalyan Das for presenting offerings from the congregation at Varanasi and several letters are addressed to him along with other disciples.<sup>98</sup> As we shall see below Kalyan Das is a main character of the modern account on the history of Nichibagh Gurdwara.

Sikh historiography relates that Guru Tegh Bahadur left Patna in 1671 and the year after summoned his family to Punjab. On the journey back his six-year old son and future successor, Guru Gobind Singh, halted at Varanasi where hundreds of devotees sought his blessing.<sup>99</sup> According to the local lore Guru Gobind Singh handed over his sandals to the congregation to keep his visit forever in memory.

The city of Varanasi is reputed for the visit of Bhai Gurdas, the devout scribe of the Sikh Gurus, and Guru Gobind Singh's establishment of the Nirmala order. The local historiography asserts that Bhai Gurdas stayed in Varanasi for more than two years in the beginning of the seventeenth century, making propaganda of the Gurus' teaching and converting hundreds of Hindus to Sikhism. Among his followers was the Maharaja of Varanasi, who granted him residence at Visheshwar Ganj in the Northern part of the city.<sup>100</sup>

According to a nineteenth century source Guru Gobind Singh invited a Brahman from Varanasi to come and teach his Sikhs Sanskrit. The Brahmin declined the invitations, saying that only Brahmins were entitled to learn Sanskrit or the Vedas and most of the Sikhs did not belong to this caste. In response the Guru said that Sikhs would become more erudite than Brahmins who in the future would learn from the Sikhs.<sup>101</sup> The tradition tells that Guru Gobind Singh ordered five of his disciples to

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to another letter a similar offering of 166 rupees had been presented to the Guru from the Sikh in Varanasi (Fauja Singh 1996: 71, 76 – 79).

<sup>98</sup> Fauja Singh 1996: 51.

<sup>99</sup> For a modern interpretation of this event, see Johar 1975.

<sup>100</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihasik Yadan*, p. 13 – 14. As the more detailed historiography at *Shri Chetan Math* relates, Bhai Gurdas escaped Punjab and sought shelter in Varanasi after Guru Hargobind had tested his loyalty and faith. Guru Hargobind had sent Bhai Gurdas from Amritsar to Kabul to purchase a horse, but when he was to pay the horse-seller he found that the Guru had given him potsherds instead of coins. For a while Bhai Gurdas' faith was shaken by the trial and he ran off to Varanasi. After Bhai Gurdas had stayed in city for more than two years the Maharaja received a letter from Guru Hargobind, who had been aware of Bhai Gurdas' residence. In the letter Guru Hargobind alleged that a thief was residing in Varanasi and requested the Maharaja to handcuff and return the bandit to the Guru's custody. At first the Maharaja was shocked by the news, but when Bhai Gurdas explained about the event in Kabul, he decided to accompany the scribe to the Guru's court in Amritsar. Wearing handcuffs Bhai Gurdas fell down at the feet of Guru Hargobind in forgiveness. The Guru hugged Bhai Gurdas and uttered the oft-quoted words: "The one who will read your hymns will also have the right to read Guru Granth Sahib" (*Ik Aumkar Satguru Prasad*, Shri Chetan Math, Varanasi). For an abbreviated English version of this story, consult Jodh Singh: 1998: 3 – 5.

<sup>101</sup> The reference is included in Ratan Singh Bhangu's work *Guru Panth Prakash* completed in 1841 (see Bhai Vir Singh 1982, Dhillon 2004).

Varanasi in 1686 to pursue studies in Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. The Sikh students established themselves at the former house of Bhai Gurdas and after nine years of studies blossomed into knowledgeable *Nirmala* or “stainless” scholars. One of the five, Pandit Karam Singh, is said to have instituted a school for Sanskrit studies and a seat and succession of *Nirmala* scholars.<sup>102</sup> The present gurdwara *Shri Chetan Math* at Visheshwar Ganj commemorates these two events and continues to give Sanskrit education to boys and girls at a registered college now called *Shri Guru Nanak Nirmal Sanskrit Vidhyalaya*.<sup>103</sup> The *Nirmala* tradition has several other historical establishments in the city, most notably the *Nirmal Sanskrit Vidhyala* at Lahori Thora near Dashashwamedh Road which holds a gurdwara on the first floor.<sup>104</sup>

It is with the arrival of British colonizers that the demographical figures of the Sikhs at Varanasi begin to crystallize. The city was under British administration from 1795 and the first Census for the district was executed in 1871 – 1872.<sup>105</sup> Up to the partition in 1947 the city belonged to the United Provinces of Oudh and Agra and was after independence incorporated in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The ways by which the Census reports categorize and pay attention to local Sikhs mirror the colonizers’ political interests and more rigid views on religious identity.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Ik Aumkar Satguru Prasad*, Shri Chetan Math, Varanasi.

<sup>103</sup> The organization at *Shri Chetan Math* is run by an independent committee founded on donations and property revenues. The Sanskrit college is affiliated to the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University in Varanasi. When I visited *Shri Chetan Math* in 2001 there were about 50 students attached to the Sanskrit college and 12 students of different ages lived permanently in the gurdwara. The present Mahant, Inderjit Singh, has gained fame for his astrological knowledge and divinations.

<sup>104</sup> Raghubir Singh Shastri runs the present *Nirmal Sanskrit Vidhyalaya* at Lahori Thora. He is a Sanskrit scholar and active propagandist of Sikhism, often invited to deliver speeches in the Sikh gurdwaras.

<sup>105</sup> Mishra 1975: 2. Ganda Singh (1974) has interestingly shown how the first census of 1871 – 1872 created great suspicions and rumours among locals. Pilgrims at Varanasi refused to have their names registered since they suspected the British collected data for new taxations. It was rumoured that Census registrations were only pretence for demanding young village girls to England for fanning the English queen, since the weather had become too hot (Ganda Singh 1974: 350).

<sup>106</sup> While Oberoi (1995) has observed how the British constructed images of Sikhism in the mould of Christianity and created the myth predicating a decline of Sikhism, Ballantyne (1999) has paid more attention to the way in which the British imagined a congruence of religious beliefs and cultural values between the Sikhs and themselves. The latter study demonstrates how the British interpreted the Sikh religion as the Protestantism of India, which condemned popular Hinduism for being lost to superstitious idolatry (like Catholicism). Fearing a degeneration of Sikhism the British recruited Sikhs to the military to preserve and foster a *Khalsa* identity (Ballantyne 1999: 195 – 209).



#### NANAK-PANTHIS AND PUNJABI SINGHS

In the British records of Varanasi district from 1881 to 1901 the population was divided into two broad religious categories of Hindus and Muslims, whereas Sikhs and Jains, along with other groups – such as Rajputs, Scheidiks, Lepers, etc. – were arranged under the miscellaneous heading “others”. In the Census report of 1901, Commissioner R. Burn gives an explanation as to why Jains and Sikhs were not officially registered into separate religious categories: “As these two religions are known to be engaged in no considerable propaganda in these provinces, it was considered unnecessary to print Table XIII in detail for them.”<sup>107</sup> Since the census commissioner did not find the Sikhs involved in missionary activities on the Indo Gangetic plains it was unnecessary to specify them in the general report. A district report from 1897, however, indicates that the number of Sikhs who lived in Benares district close to the turn of the century may have embraced approximately four to five hundred individuals.<sup>108</sup> In this report a modest number of 28 Sikhs were registered for Benares Municipality and 52 Sikhs in the Cantonment area. It is evident from the same record that many Sikhs resided in rural wards of the district, such as Adampura (12 people) and Camp (24 people). In the neighborhood Bajardiha 357 individuals were reported as Sikhs. At the end of nineteenth century this area was located within the Bhelupura ward and classified as a rural area, but with the rapid expansion of Varanasi came to be included in the townscape.<sup>109</sup> One can assume that the individuals reported as Sikhs were related to Gurubagh Gurdwara which belonged to Bhelupura.

During the decades to follow the official records for the province and Varanasi come to specify the Sikhs under a separate heading. One reason for the detailed reports was the new method of collecting census data. Prior to the census of 1911 the colonial rulers introduced a more careful registration system. In the earlier census reports the officers had themselves ascertained and classified the population by religious categories. Consequently, those who explicitly stated that they were Sikhs or appeared to be Sikhs according to the British were reported as Sikhs. Writing on the Punjab, Oberoi (1995) alleges that the British utilized a mechanical manner of categorizing people that supported conservative interpretations of a Sikh identity. The officers made a distinction between followers of Guru Nanak and Khalsa Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh. Only those who kept the five symbols and followed the Sikh code of conduct were classified as “real” Sikhs, whereas others were reported to be Hindus. As a result, a large number of Sikhs who did not follow the code of conduct were officially recorded as Hindus.<sup>110</sup> The change of registration method from 1911 implied

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<sup>107</sup> *Census of India, 1901*, Vol. XVI. N.-W. Provinces and Oudh Part 1, 1902: 247.

<sup>108</sup> According to this census, Benares district signified both urban and rural areas within the following wards: Baragon, Sikrani, Phulpur Chaubepur, Rohania, Adampura, Chaitganj, Camp, Bhelupura, Dasasomedh, Kotwali, Kal Bhairon, Cholaipur, Mirzamurad, Shakaldiha, Chandauli, Said Raja, Balua, Alinagar, Ramnagar. *Census of India 1897, Banaras District*, p. 67.

<sup>109</sup> *Census of India 1897, Banaras District*, pp. 40, 56, 65, 67.

<sup>110</sup> Oberoi 1995: 211.

that people were from now on asked about their religious belonging instead of being imputed a religious identity by British agents. All who stated themselves to be Sikhs were accordingly to be registered as Sikhs. The lack of specific categories for the various Hindu traditions in earlier reports was attended by enumerating separate castes and tribes that belonged to Hinduism but did not conform to Brahmanism or an orthodox Hindu identity.<sup>111</sup>

The distinction between Nanak panthis, or “followers of the way of Nanak”, and Khalsa Singhs appears in the earliest colonial reports on Varanasi. When H. H. Wilson, a Sanskritist in service of the East Indian Company, in the early nineteenth century wrote one of the earliest account on the Sikhs in Varanasi he subdivided the Sikhs into seven different categories. The major groups, which Wilson paid special attention to, were firstly the two ascetic disciplines of *Udasin*, followers of the tradition associated with Shri Chand (the son of Guru Nanak), and *Nirmala*, the saintly order founded by the five Sikhs who Guru Gobind Singh dispatched to Varanasi for learning Sanskrit.<sup>112</sup> As Wilson noticed the two orders were to be found at principal seats of Hindu learning like Varanasi and they often patronized large properties. The Udasins had several establishments in the city and were primarily occupied with readings of the compositions of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, while the Nirmalas were expounders of Vedanta philosophy with a slightly less number of followers. The object of worship in both traditions was “the book” to which votaries presented food, flowers, and money.<sup>113</sup> A third major category of Sikhs was in Wilson’s classification the so-called Govind Sinhis, or the followers of Guru Gobind Singh,

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<sup>111</sup> Those who did not accept the supremacy of Brahmans or the Vedas, did not have Brahmans as priests or family priests or have received mantra from them, did not worship the great Hindu gods nor revere the cow, were denied access to the interior of Hindu temples and were considered to cause ritual pollution.

<sup>112</sup> The other Sikh “sects” Wilson mentions are: the *Ganj Bakhshis*, which were briefly observed as a small and fairly unknown group derived from Guru Nanak; a political group of followers to the grandson of Guru Hari Rai (Rama Raya) called the *Ramrayis*; the *Suthra Shahis* who were travelling performers of Punjabi folksongs and considered Guru Tegh Bahadur their founder; and the *Nagas* who were mendicants closely related to the Nirmalas (Wilson 1958 (1861): 149 – 154).

<sup>113</sup> Wilson provides a short description of the evening service at an Udasin establishment at Varanasi (Wilson 1958 (1861): 150 – 154). According Kahn Singh Nabha, *Nirmala* and *Udasin* saints installed the Sikh scripture at about forty places in Varanasi, even if he does not mention during which period this was carried out (Nabha, 1996 (1930): 314). In the end of the 1970s Sinha & Saraswati reported that there were eleven religious institutions of the *Udasin* tradition in Varanasi and eight of the *Nirmala*. They found three Sikh gurdwaras in the city, out of which two was under the control of “Khalsa” and the third was taken care of by a Nirmala ascetic (Sinha & Saraswati, 1978: 138 – 143). At the beginning of the twenty-first century there were six major educational institutions and *Akharas* in Varanasi that were run by Udasin. These institutions are: (1) *Udasin Panchayati Akhara* in Assi; (2) *Sadhu Bela Ashram* in Assi; (3) *Udasin Sanskrit Maha Vidhyala* at Dhundiraj Gali; (4) *Udasin Sanskrit Maha Vidhyala* at Mir Ghat; (5) *Udasin Guru Sangat Sanskrit Maha Vidhyala*; and (6) *Kashini Vidhya Bhavan* in Kvaindra Puri. Information provided by Swami Santoshmuni at *Udasin Sanskrit Maha Vidhyala*, 2004-08-26.

who were “wholly of a worldly and warlike spirit” and had substituted the Vedas and the Puranas for the book of the tenth Guru.<sup>114</sup> Apparently Wilson visited a Sikh gurdwara or a “chapel” in Varanasi and mentioned that “the Book, a large folio, there denominated *Sambhu Granth*, was said to contain the contributions of the following writers: Nanak, Nam Deo, Kabir, Sheikh Feridaddin, Dhanna, Ramanand, Pipa, Sena, Jayadeva, Phandak, Sudama, Prahlad, Dhuru, Raidas, Vibhishana, Mira Bahi, Karma Bai.”<sup>115</sup>

Census reports in the twentieth century would likewise notice a dominant presence of Udasin and Nirmala sants and grouped these two as “Nanak-panthis”, who were different from “real” Punjabi Sikhs.<sup>116</sup> In a district Gazetteer of 1909, for instance, Nevill classified local Sikhs into two categories: “members of one or other of the various kinds of Nanakshahi faqirs, or else are Punjabis employed in Government service”.<sup>117</sup> Nanak-panthis included about four to five hundred followers in the city and were primarily members of Nirmala and Udasin orders with several separate establishments in the city, “but in spite of minor differences they all meet and eat together on stated occasions”. Nevill noted that Nanak-panthis displayed a tendency to relax their exclusive loyalty to the Guru Granth Sahib and, like other religious groups in Varanasi, were drawn into purely Hindu practices.<sup>118</sup>

It is noteworthy that the new registration method of 1911 entailed an overall decrease in the number of Sikhs and a sharper division between Nanak followers and Khalsa Sikhs. The census of 1911, compiled by Commissioner E.A.H. Blunt, is the first detailed census report on the Sikhs. In total 571 Sikhs were registered within Benares division, which was the larger administrative district including surrounding towns of Mirzapur, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Ballia. Of these, 350 Sikhs were residing in Varanasi town. When commissioner Blunt commented on the decreasing numbers of Sikhs he concluded that previous administrators must have made a widespread “error” of recording Vaishnava Hindus belonging to the Nanak panthis as Sikhs in earlier census reports. To Blunt, Sikhism was a religion clearly separated from the Hindus:

Sikhism is not so old, but it is a religion with a very distinct worship of its own, the vast majority of Sikhs would laugh at the suggestion that they are merely a Hindu sect; and it has attained a position of independence which fully entitles it to rank as a separate religion.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Wilson 1958 (1861): 152 – 153.

<sup>115</sup> Wilson 1958 (1861): 153.

<sup>116</sup> In *Census of India 1901* commissioner Burn writes that the majority of “real Sikhs” are employed in the police or army in these provinces, though there are a few immigrants from the Punjab in the western districts (*Census of India 1901*, Vol. XVI, 1902: 66).

<sup>117</sup> *Benares: A Gazetteer*, Neville 1909: 88.

<sup>118</sup> *Benares: A Gazetteer*, Neville 1909: 93.

<sup>119</sup> *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XV, 1912: 106.

With the new registration method the Nanak panthis were pigeonholed as a “Vaishnava sect of Hindus” with 352 members in total in Varanasi.<sup>120</sup> In other words, when followers of the Udasins and Nirmalas were asked to state their religious affiliation they prefer to categorize themselves as Hindus and not as Sikhs. The reasons behind this categorization may have been a combination of colonial politics, the growing self-awareness among different religious communities, and intellectual and political influences of the predominantly Hindu context.

	<i>Benares Division</i>	<i>Male percent</i>	<i>Female percent</i>	<i>Benares city</i>	<i>Male percent</i>	<i>Female percent</i>
<i>Census 1911</i>	571	72%	28%	350	81 %	19%
<i>Census 1921</i>	365	43 %	57%	46	50 %	50%
<i>Census 1931</i>	424	65%	35%	154	69%	31%

Figure 1.

In 1893, for instance, intellectual Hindus in Varanasi founded the association *Nagri Pracharini Sabha* with the aim to develop Hindi literature and language. The driving force of the association was Baba Shyam Sundar Das (1875 – 1937), the first professor in Hindi at Benares Hindu University, who started the magazine *Manoranjan Pustakmala* to illustrate Indian history and religion. Between 1914 and 1922 the magazine published four articles on different events in the Sikh history. As Banerjee (1992) suggests, the articles reflect critical Hindu reactions to political endeavours to mark out a separate Sikh identity in the Punjab, either by presenting Sikhism as a religion that belonged to the larger Hindu society and emerged for protection and restoration of Hinduism, or by explicitly warning against separatist views of Sikh leaders.<sup>121</sup> It remains unclear if these articles represented widespread reactions within the local Hindu society or if the authors just wrote from a dominant Hindu paradigm of historiography. It is a similarly cloudy matter if the late nineteenth century Sikh reform movement Singh Sabha and the Gurdwara Reform Movement in the 1920s exerted any direct influence on Nanak followers and the Sikhs in Varanasi. The fact that British records on Varanasi from the beginning of twentieth century remain silent on these matters may indicate that Sikh residents were not only small in numbers but rather unmoved by political developments in the Punjab. In consideration of the colonizers vigilance for agitations and proselytizing activities at other places within the provinces of Agra and Oudh,<sup>122</sup> one could expect that at least a note on local po-

<sup>120</sup> *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XV, 1912: 156 – 157.

<sup>121</sup> Banerjee 1992: 150 – 155.

<sup>122</sup> In *Census of India 1931*, for instance, Commissioner Turner noted that the Sikhs had carried out a massive campaign and census propaganda among Jats in the western parts of the province to induce them to return to Sikhism. The movement was organized from Delhi and local Sikhs in western districts broadcasted printed handbills, exhorting Jats, especially Pachlada Jats, to re-

litical actions would creep into the British records. Another explanation as to why local Nirmalas and Udasins chose to categorize themselves as Vaishnava Hindus was simply that they did not consider themselves as Sikhs and did not see any need to claim such an identity, especially not in a major Hindu pilgrimage centre like Varanasi.

CENSUS 1911, VARANASI	
OCCUPATION	NUMBERS OF SIKHS
<i>Army</i>	215
<i>Police</i>	27
<i>Public administration</i>	2
<i>Banks, establishment of credit exchange and insurance</i>	13
<i>Trade in textiles</i>	9
<i>Trade in chemical products</i>	9
<i>Trade in food stuff</i>	7
<i>Trade in articles of luxury</i>	3
<i>Cashiers, clerks, book keepers</i>	8
<i>Industry of food (sweet makers)</i>	5
<i>Industry of textiles</i>	2
<i>Jewellers, guilders</i>	2
<i>Cultivators (ordinary)</i>	11
<i>Estate agents</i>	2
<i>Religion ("priests", temple servants)</i>	11
<i>Medicine</i>	2
<i>Cooks, water carriers, doorkeepers, watchmen</i>	6
<i>Grooms, coachmen</i>	7
<i>Proprietors (pensioners, scholarship holders)</i>	4
<i>Unproductive (beggars, procurers, etc.)</i>	1
Figure 2.	Total 346

During the first part of the twentieth century the census officers struggled with the fluctuating demographic figures of Sikhs in the provinces of Agra and Oudh. If more than three hundred Sikhs were reported for Varanasi town in 1911, the figures dropped to a modest number of 46 Sikhs in the Census of 1921 and within the following ten-year period increased to 154 individuals. Variations of the same kind appeared in the census of Varanasi division (See Figure 1). The gender distribution of the Sikh population also reveals that men were over-represented. In census of 1911 only 19 percent of the urban Sikh population and 28 percent of the Sikhs within Va-

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port themselves as Sikhs. As a result, the Sikh population of the province increased from 14234 in 1921 to 46500 in 1931 (*Census of India 1931, Part 1, Report, 1933: 503*).

ranasi division were females.<sup>123</sup> An obvious explanation to the variability was the mobility among Sikh men who were involved in military occupations and temporarily stationed at garrisons in different parts of the district. The detailed Census table from 1911 shows that no less than 74 percent of all the Sikhs recorded for Varanasi city was employed in police and military services.

The major part of the soldiers belonged to the native army (215 men) which was solely composed by Sikhs. Commissioner Blunt confirmed that “the figures show that this increase is chiefly due to military causes. They [the Sikhs] are large only where there are cantonments.”<sup>124</sup> The officers of the two following census reports in 1921 and 1931 likewise concluded that most Sikhs in the area were semi-permanent soldiers and policemen.<sup>125</sup> The major part of the Sikh populations in Varanasi was men involved in military service whereas the number of permanent Sikh residents in Varanasi would come to little more than a hundred individuals. The census of 1911 offers a glimpse of the types of professions which these permanent residents were involved with (See Figure 2). Apart from militaries and policemen employed in governmental services, the larger part of the community was engaged in banking, industry, and the business of wool, cotton, silk, fruits, spices, precious stones, petroleum, drugs, dyes, books, musical instruments, etc., which apparently were marketable products in a pilgrimage centre. The table informs of four Sikh “priests” or “ministers” and seven other Sikhs, who worked in temples, with the burning ground services or escorted pilgrims in the city.<sup>126</sup>

To the colonial agents Varanasi remained a stronghold of Hindus. The majority of permanent residents affiliated to the Sikh tradition were Nanak panthis, chiefly followers of Udasin and Nirmala order, whereas those categorized as “real” Sikhs were fewer in numbers, except for Punjabi Singhs who passed by in service of the government. Although the typology of Sikhs and Nanak panthis proved long-lived in official writings,<sup>127</sup> the demographic map of Varanasi Sikhs came to change considerably after the departure of the British and arrival of migrants and refugees from West Punjab in 1947.

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<sup>123</sup> *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XV, 1912: 792 – 793.

<sup>124</sup> *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XV, 1912: 116.

<sup>125</sup> *Census of India 1921*, Vol. XVI, 1923: 58; *Census of India 1931*, Part 1, Report, 1933: 503.

<sup>126</sup> *Census of India 1911*, Vol. XV, 1912: 566 – 567.

<sup>127</sup> In a district Gazetteer from 1965 the Sikh population in Varanasi is still divided into “Sikhs and Nanakpanthis the later having their own holy men called the Nanakshahi fakirs” (*Uttar Pradesh District Gazetteers Varanasi*, Esha Basanti Joshi 1965: 93 – 94).

## POST-PARTITION

In the Census report of 1951 the Indian commissioner Rejshwami Prasad commented on the backlash of India's independence from Colonial rule:

The partition of the country and creation of Pakistan was attended with tribulation and the Punjab, Sindh and the North West Frontier Province in particular, witnessed carnage on a colossal scale. Millions were driven from their homes and being helpless and homeless had to change their nationality. About half a million came to Uttar Pradesh during 1947– 48.<sup>128</sup>

In Varanasi the numbers of individuals having Punjabi as their mother tongue doubled six times after the partition, and Sindhi appeared as a new vernacular to report in the district.<sup>129</sup> From the Census reports and oral recollections of elderly Sikhs it is evident that the families constituting the backbone of the Sikh community today originate from different districts of the present Pakistan – Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Gujarat, Gujranwala, Kashmir, and so on – and settled in Varanasi in the years surrounding the partition. By the year of 1951 a total number of 1285 Sikhs were reported in Varanasi district and 3067 in Varanasi division (including the towns of Banaras, Mirzapur, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Ballia). The major part of the new inhabitants was domiciled in urban areas.<sup>130</sup> Migration histories of the newcomers and their grounds for ending up in a Varanasi were differing. While some were given refugee status after passing the new border of India and were transferred compulsorily through governmental rehabilitation actions, others arrived in the city as voluntary migrants primarily because of business or family connections.

Any person who entered India having left because of being compelled to leave his and her home in Pakistan after March 1, 1947, on account of setting up the new domains of India and Pakistan was to be enumerated as a displaced person. The transitional regulation applied up to July 25, 1949, after which no migrant from Pakistan was to be treated as displaced person or Indian citizen without special registration.<sup>131</sup> The total population of displaced persons reported for Varanasi district by 1951 was 9112 persons. Of these, the large majority came from the Punjab and the distribution according to gender and age indicates that they arrived with families.<sup>132</sup> To compensate the loss of home and property in Pakistan caused by the partition, the government was to provide displaced persons shelter or give grants for procuring housing. In the urban outskirts of Varanasi the Municipal Corporation established refugee

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<sup>128</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol. II, 1953: 58.

<sup>129</sup> By 1951 there were 4054 individuals with Punjabi as their mother tongue in Varanasi district. *Census of India 1951*, Vol. II, Part II - C, 1953: 510 – 515.

<sup>130</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol. II Part II - C, 1953: 568 – 569.

<sup>131</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol. II, Part I - A, 1953: 51.

<sup>132</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol. II, Part II - C, 1953: 676 – 677.

camps and in the subsequent years built up one-storied quarters. Ashok Nagar, Kamla Nagar and Lajpat Nagar are today neighborhoods (close to Gurubagh Gurdwara) with large Sikh and Sindhi populations that initially were set up as refugee camps. Since many of the Sikh migrants were traders the Municipal Corporation provided them smaller premises in the area nearby Nichibagh Gurdwara to establish business.<sup>133</sup>

The number of individuals from Punjab and Pakistan with migrant status was larger and amounted for 14960 individuals in total. The smaller representation of women in this category (37 percent) suggests that many were migrant workers. Migration histories of my informants evince that Sikh migrants from Pakistan could be on various routes before they eventually ended up in Varanasi. Many lived temporarily at different locations in the new Indian states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh in search for a new place of settlement, while others resorted to the Sikh centre at Patna Sahib in Bihar and from there continued to Varanasi. It is apparent that people made active use of their social networks and some had established business contacts with Varanasi and surrounding towns prior to the partition, which now became determining factors of settlement.<sup>134</sup>

Census reports for the later part of the twentieth century indicate that many migrants from Pakistan settled permanently in Varanasi. The Sikh population continued to grow due to natural additions in families and the arrival of new migrants from other states seeking job opportunities. The demographic changes between 1951 and 2001 suggest an important female migration to the city (See Figure 3). Studies on the Sikh Diaspora have frequently observed a typical migration pattern according to which the first migrants are males who will later bring their wives and other family members to the country of settlement. This pattern, however, is not merely characteristic of Diaspora communities outside India but counts for migrating Sikhs in India as well. Female migration is more or less inbuilt in the marriage practices of the Sikhs. In line with the normative patrilocal system of arranged marriages women are expected

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES BETWEEN 1951 AND 2001			
	<i>Varanasi District</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Census 1951	1285	61%	39%
Census 1961	2516	58%	42%
Census 1971	2883	62%	38%
Census 1981	3883	56%	44%
Census 2001	4496	54%	46%

Figure 3.

<sup>133</sup> Multiple interviews, 2000-2001. At the time of my fieldwork the governmental quarters from the 1950s were still preserved in Ashok Nagar and Kamla Nagar, near *Bharat Mata Mandir*.

<sup>134</sup> A woman said the religious reputation of Varanasi was decisive for the settlement of her family. Her grandfather from Marachi in Pakistan expressly wanted to spend his last days in Kashi, believing that he would gain liberation, and consequently he moved with his whole family to the city.



to move to the house of their husbands and in-laws and this will sometimes bring them considerable distance from the native place. Adherence to traditional marriage practices can presumably explain the increasing population of women in Varanasi. Instead of marrying in to local families at Varanasi the male migrants who arrived after the partition followed endogamous rules and wedded Punjabi women of suitable clan or caste (*gotra*) primarily from the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh or Bihar.

#### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

A major challenge in Diasporic Sikh communities is what to do with the new generations who do not acquire sufficient knowledge to speak Punjabi or read the Gurmukhi script of their religious texts.<sup>135</sup> Since readings and recitations makes such a fundamental part of the Sikh religious life some have feared that the linguistic problem may induce far-reaching consequences on Sikh practices in the future. In these discussions Sikhs residing in a so-called Indian Diaspora, that is, outside Punjab but still within India, have not always been taken into account, even if they often are facing similar challenges as communities in other parts of the world.

One can assume that Punjabi refugees and migrants who arrived in Varanasi after the partition in 1947 were fluent in spoken Punjabi. The census report of 1951 registered a total number of 4054 speakers in Varanasi district who had Punjabi as their mother tongue. Almost half of these (48 percent) were bilingual with Hindi and Urdu as subsidiary languages. The statistics of speakers with Hindi as a mother tongue but Punjabi as subsidiary language, on the other hand, amounted to only 125 people.<sup>136</sup> All Punjabi speaking persons in Varanasi were certainly not Sikhs, but it is probable that the major part of the Sikh migrants from the Punjab reported themselves as Punjabi speaking.

The new-settlers seem to have realized early the importance of language knowledge for the second and third generation growing up in a Hindi speaking area. Already in the 1950s the Sikh community established two schools – *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* in Gurubagh and *Guru Nanak English School* in Shivpur – to provide children primary education and language courses in Punjabi. Today the schools shoulder the responsibility of Punjabi teaching to children of Sikh and Sindhi families in Varanasi. The children will start with the Gurmukhi script in the third grade and intensify the studies of written and spoken Punjabi between the sixth and twelfth grade. The goal is, as the teachers of *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* in Gurubagh said, to “learn their own language and make it possible for them to recite the Guru Granth Sahib ji.” The students will be trained to read hymns from the Sikh scripture during the four last years in school and given opportunities to prove their recitation skills in

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<sup>135</sup> For discussions on the language problem and the translation controversy, see Cole 1982a and Dusenbery 1992.

<sup>136</sup> *Census of India 1951*, Vol II, Uttar Pradesh, Table D - 1, 1953: 514 – 515.

oral tests before professional reciters. The prime motive for learning Punjabi is to pursue knowledge to read, recite and understand the sacred texts.

For Sikhs the Punjabi language is also intimately associated with the cultural and ethnic aspects of the Sikh identity. Most of my informants were bilingual with sound knowledge in Hindi which they used in conversations in their everyday social life. When visiting the homeland of the Punjab some said they felt linguistically alienated from the native land, being ridiculed for their mixture of Punjabi and the local *Bhojpuri* dialect typical of Varanasi. The loss of the Punjabi language is a loss of a part of one's identity, just as proficiency in spoken Punjabi becomes a signifier for a religious and cultural identity.

LITERACY OF TOTAL POPULATION BY RELIGION IN VARANASI DISTRICT 2001 (Percentage of literates of total population within each religious community)				
Total Sikh population	(4496)	71 %	urban 78 %	rural 54 %
Total Sikh population		male 77 %	female 63 %	
Rural		male 67 %	female 38 %	
Urban		male 82 %	female 74 %	
Total Jain population	(1747)	81 %	urban 83 %	rural 68 %
Total Christian population	(4499)	74 %	urban 77 %	rural 65 %
Total Buddhist population	(985)	64 %	urban 79 %	rural 49 %
Total Hindu population	(2627565)	56 %	urban 69 %	rural 50 %
Total Muslim population	(497516)	44 %	urban 42 %	rural 44 %
All religions total population	(3138671)	54 %	urban 61 %	rural 49 %

Figure 4.

The emphasis on language education in the urban Sikh community has resulted in a high rate of literacy in comparison to other communities in the district (See Figure 4). The percentage of literates among the total Sikh population in Varanasi was 71 in Census 2001. The variables of gender and residence display significant differences between urban and rural areas: literacy is highest among Sikh men in urban settings (82 percent), while only two-fifths (38 percent) of Sikh women in rural areas are registered as literate. Sikh women living in the city of Varanasi, on the other hand, constitute a fairly literate community (74 percent), considering that the rate of literate women of the total female population in urban areas counts to only 43 percentages.

The statistics presume that literacy implies the ability to read and write a language. In the local context a claimed literacy, however, is not always conditioned by writing. When I asked the respondents in the semi-structured interviews on their language knowledge the major part (71 percent) stated they were fluent in Punjabi and were able to read and write the Gurmukhi script. The majority had learnt Punjabi from their families, in school and the gurdwara, while some said they were self-

taught through individual reading practices. The remaining respondents (13 percent) said they could not read nor write in Punjabi, but still claimed they were able to recite hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib from memory or follow text recitations in religious settings. The figures stand for the selected group of informants and cannot lay any claim to represent the community at large. Still the responses may suggest some general notions related to literacy. When the respondents said they “know” Punjabi and the language of the sacred texts the majority referred to their ability of reading and writing. Those who had not pursued knowledge of writing the Gurmukhi script, but knew how to recite and reproduce text in speech, would likewise claim literacy. One female respondent had in fact gone through the ceremony *charni lagna*, in which professional reciters need to prove their language skill before they can perform recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib (See Chapter 2), even though she was unable to write in Gurmukhi. In this case literacy and language proficiency was entirely based on the ability to decode the sacred script and enunciate the words. The instance seems to suggest that at least to some Sikhs the criteria for a claimed literacy of the religious language is somewhat deviant from literacy in the secular languages used in everyday life. Reading and enunciation of the sacred writing of the Gurus is significant in the Sikh religious life, but the ability to write is not necessitated. To engage in the Gurus’ words, already committed to writing, one needs merely to read and speak to master the sacred language.

#### KHATRI AND PUNJABI TRADERS

The caste system in India is confusing, and in practice there is no single “system” or pattern which can be applied to all the realities of social groups. The hierarchy of four castes or *varnas* (“colors”) – *Brahmins*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisha*, *Shudra* – which according to popular literature is supposed to constitute a fixed system with Brahmins on the top, signifies a theoretical model drawn from Sanskrit texts and is a highly unstable pyramid. The idea and practice of social hierarchies are not modeled after the *varna* system but will vary between different districts and communities in India. In a predominantly traditional Hindu city like Varanasi the Brahmins occupy high status both in practices and discourses, whereas their rank and position have not been particularly high in the Punjab where landowners and agriculturists constitute the upper social strata.<sup>137</sup> The meaningful components of the social “system” are instead *zat* (Punjabi) or *jati* (Hindi) which designates social position fixed by birth into an endogamous community or larger grouping, such as Jat, Khatri, Rajput, Brahmin, etc., in which individuals will remain for the rest of their lives. Each *zat* will further be divided into smaller exogamous groups of clans or sub-castes called *got* (Punjabi) or *gotra* (Hindi). According to customary marriage and kinship rules the individual

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<sup>137</sup> See e.g. Indera P. Singh’s (1959) discussion on Sikhism versus Brahminism in his study of a Punjabi Sikh village.

should ideally marry outside his or her *got* but within any of the approved *zat* to which one belongs.

The most dominant and leading social group or *zat* in the Sikh community is undoubtedly the Jats who claim to be nomads that at some point in history settled in the Punjab.<sup>138</sup> The Jats became influential agriculturalists and landowners, holding major areas of land in the Punjab, and embraced the Sikh religion in an early phase. In the Census 1881 no less than 66 percent of all Sikhs in the Punjab were estimated to be Jats whereas the mercantile castes of Khatri and Aroras amounted to less than 2.5 percent each of the total Sikh population.<sup>139</sup> Today the Jats are still in majority and the dominant political power in the Punjab. In Varanasi, however, the demographical figures are somewhat different, with Khatri Sikhs constituting the main body of the local community. "Most people here belong to Khatri", a *granthi* said. A list of prominent members of the gurdwara committee (VGPC) and other leading families will promptly confirm this dominance: Bagga, Bedi, Bhatra, Dua, Kapoor, Kohli, Nirula, Sabharwal, Sethi, Saluja, Thappar, to mention a few, are *got* names of families who claim Khatri status. Other Punjabi castes such as Rajput, Jat, Brahman, and especially business communities like Arora and Ahluwalia are represented and active in the communal life, but they are in the minority.<sup>140</sup> The reason for this demographical situation can be found in the traditional occupations of Khatri Sikhs and the attraction of Varanasi as a pilgrimage and trading centre.

The Khatri were numerous in the West and North Western areas of the Punjab before the partition in 1947 and commerce led them to distant parts of India and beyond. The highway Grand Trunk Road (earlier attributed to Sher Shah) which ran from Peshwar in the west and passed by Varanasi on its way eastwards, apparently made it easier for Punjabi merchants to establish business connections in the Gangetic lands.<sup>141</sup> In the eighteenth century Varanasi developed into a leading centre of trade under the British administration and attracted Khatri traders, bankers and money lenders from the Punjab and other regions. The city acquired financial influence and became reputed for its mercantile life, especially the trade in cloth, raw silk, and precious metals.<sup>142</sup> As I was told, Khatri and Baniya Sikhs from the Punjab and other parts of the country early established business contacts with Varanasi. After the partition in 1947 these contacts accelerated and brought about settlements in the city.

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<sup>138</sup> A popular theory traces the origin of the Jats to the Scythian culture and proposes they settled in the Punjab between 300 B.C. and A.D. 200 (see K.S. Singh 2003: 226).

<sup>139</sup> McLeod 1976: 93.

<sup>140</sup> The caste-based association *Rajput Baradari* (brotherhood) in Varanasi has sponsored gurdwara constructions and today assumed responsibility for the *sewa* of cleaning roads in processions of Guru Granth Sahib during Sikh festivals.

<sup>141</sup> The Sikh gurdwara near the railway junction Mogul Sarai, just outside Varanasi, is named *Grand Trunk Road Gurdwara* after the highway which is passing by. In 1862 the railway link between Varanasi and Mogul Sarai facilitated new communication.

<sup>142</sup> Mishra 1975: 4, 170, Parkash 1981: 25, Banerjee 2003: 76, note 10.

The historical presence of Punjabi traders in the city and the close relationship between Sikh and Hindu Khatris is today palpably manifested in the ritual space of the so-called *Punjabi Chabutra* or *Khatri Chabutra* – a platform for cremations at the outdoor burning ground of Manikarnika Ghat beside the river Ganga. Admittance to the platform is reserved only for dead bodies of Punjabi and Khatri origin and is thus shared by Sikhs and Hindus. Even deceased Sikhs not born into the Khatri *zat* but of lower castes, as well as Sindhis with affiliation to Sikhism may be cremated on the upraised area, almost as if they assumed Khatri status at the time of death. The history of *Punjab Chabutra* is rendered in at least two different versions. When Parry (1994) did fieldwork among Hindu funeral priests at Manikarnika Ghat he recorded a story about the wealthy Punjabi trader Lala Kashmiri Mal who purchased the platform in the eighteenth century. When funeral attendants at Harishchandra Ghat, the other cremation ground in Varanasi, demanded an exorbitant amount of money for cremating his dead mother, he bought the land at Manikarnika Ghat by covering a part of the river bank with gold coins.<sup>143</sup>

The other version I was told by the Sikhs attribute *Punjabi Chabutra* to Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab. On a visit in Varanasi in the beginning of the nineteenth century Ranjit Singh found that Brahman funeral priests refused Sikh soldiers cremations at Manikarnika Ghat. After bargaining with the priests the Maharaja purchased a cremation place by laying out a grid of gold coins, which was later replaced by a platform. For Sikhs the story generates meaning of being represented within a ritual space that remains subject to domination of Hindu funeral priests – a space which they share with Hindu Khatris and Sindhis. The *Punjabi Chabutra* is today under control of the local caste association *Khatri Samaj*. The association has a small office at Manikarnika Ghat and cooperates with the Sikh community by lending keys to the otherwise locked in platform before cremation ceremonies.

The Khatris often assert they are warrior descendents of Kshatriyas in the Hindu system and mytho-genealogical legends will tell how they originated from this caste. Since all the Sikh Gurus were born into Khatri families the caste group occupies an elevated status in the Punjabi society, especially those who belong to the same *got* as the Gurus (i.e. Bedi, Trehan, Bhalla and Sodhi). Traditionally Khatris have been urban-based and distinguished themselves in trade, money lending, and later industry and governmental services. The internal organization of the Khatri *zat* is divided into several clans and sub-clans. The caste group is generally branched into four high status clans, each of which have traditionally observed exogamy and is teamed with the number of subgroups or “houses” (*ghar*) according to hierarchical order. A group of twelve Khatri houses constitute a separated grouping of intermediate status, followed by another fifty-two “houses” and sub-groups.<sup>144</sup> The Sikh Khatris share their

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<sup>143</sup> Parry 1994: 44 – 45. Apparently this story alludes to the famous Lala Kashmiri Mal who in the eighteenth century established a leading banking house in the city and became treasurer for the Raja of Benares (Mishra 1975: 171 – 172).

<sup>144</sup> K. S. Singh 2003.

caste identity with Hindus and the majority of Khatri remain Hindus. According to an old tradition one son of a Hindu Khatri family should become a Singh. When it comes to marriage practices, religious affiliation and differences have been comparatively insignificant and intermarriages do occur between Khatri Sikhs and Hindus. Within one and the same family one may consequently find followers of both the Hindu and the Sikh religion, even if this will be more exceptional in families who intend to observe the Khalsa discipline. In face of modernization inter-caste marriages are by many looked upon as the ultimate test in abolition of the caste system, so strongly associated with social inequalities in the Hindu society. Families who promote the Khalsa ideals profoundly advocate a caste-less Sikh community in accordance with the Gurus' teaching and claim that religious qualities rather than the social *got* belonging should be favored in marriage arrangements.<sup>145</sup>

When the marriage of a young Khalsa man of a Khatri family was arranged in Varanasi in 2001 the female match-maker (*vichola*) intentionally suggested a young woman of a lower Gujarati caste to bridge caste divisions. The prospective bride was also initiated in Khalsa and shared similar religious values. In one conversation the matchmaker strongly criticized the Sikh community for upholding hypergamous practices which made caste identity, financial position, and physical appearance the determining factors for choosing a spouse, rather than "internal qualities that will produce a sweet smell in the house that never fades away". Religious propagandists and other employees in the gurdwaras vividly support caste abolition on ideological grounds and sometimes go in between marriage arrangements to negotiate between families.<sup>146</sup>

The trading profession of Khatri, in combination with their shared caste identity with Hindus, has resulted in numerous clichéd caste images expressed in folk myths, proverbs and aphorisms. The Khatri are often contrasted with the dominant "other" – the Jats in the Punjab. As landowners and chief-producer of food the Jats have strong emotional ties to their land and consider themselves at top of the social hierarchy. The Jats are said to have incorporated the ideology and ethics of warriors and value male virtues and physical strength, but are relaxed when it comes to caste rules and ritual customs. "They are the ones whose hair can be shorn", a Sikh woman in Varanasi said when she explained their more lax attitude towards religious symbols. If a Khatri Sikh cut his hair he would compromise with his Sikh identity and probably be regarded as a Hindu by others. Stereotypes of the Khatri hold them to be more "soft" and timid in nature, but cunning in business. Their affiliation to the Hindu social system makes them stricter with religious observances in order to maintain the Sikh identity and elevate their social status. Khatri are therefore said to be

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<sup>145</sup> According to McLeod, the Sikhs may advocate freedom from the *varan* notion of caste, but not the *jati* concept. See his essay on Sikh concepts of castes in McLeod 2007.

<sup>146</sup> The custom of keeping *got* names as surnames instead of using only "Singh" or "Kaur" to indicate caste background of high status is similarly disapproved by gurdwara employees and reformist spokespersons in the community who are of the opinion that the Sikh identity, and particularly a *Khalsa* identity, should subsume previous social divisions.

more inclined towards ritual worship. These value-laden schemes of stereotypes are intended to create differentiation and borders between groups within the Sikh community and strengthen images of the self. But it should also be noted that the various *zat* do observe different caste-related customs. Some ceremonies observed by Khatri Sikhs will not be found in the Jat society and vice versa. The following descriptions will reflect collective worship and family practices among a few Sikh informants of Khatri castes and others who were strongly influenced by the Khatri dominance at Varanasi. A survey among other social groups would most probably have generated slightly different information.

### SIKHISM AS A SOCIAL PROJECT

Another significant group of the local community in Varanasi is Hindus who have converted to the Sikh religion. Some of my informants said their families were “decorated” as Sikhs (*sikh saje*) one or two generations back and told about mass-conversions of Hindus, in history and modern times, when hundreds of villagers had gone through the Sikh initiation ceremony (*Khande di pahul*) and adopted a Khalsa identity. Most of the converts I spoke with originated from rural areas and belonged to lower castes. Conversion to Sikhism was motivated by experiences of social discrimination in the Hindu society.

Religious conversion to Sikhism has been an understudied subject, probably because of the prevailing perception among scholars and the Sikhs themselves that conversion is not a feature of the tradition. One exception is the historical analysis of Sikh attitudes towards conversion by Fenech (2003), which focuses on the public stance (or lack of stance) to conversion taken up by the Sikh reform movement Singh Sabha in the nineteenth century.<sup>147</sup> As Fenech suggests, the Singh Sabha reformers promoted a Khalsa identity that separated the Sikhs from the Hindu and Muslim “other”, however they did not take up a clear official policy regarding conversion to Sikhism. One of the several reasons for this lack of a concise formulation Fenech finds in the motives behind the establishment of Singh Sabha: the reform movement emerged to restore Sikhism from within and strengthen the loyalty to Khalsa ideals among the Sikhs, rather than converting non-Sikhs to the religion. Reform and missionary activities carried out by the Singh Sabha, as well as contemporary Sikh institutions, such as the *Dharam Pracharak Committee* of the SGPC and the Sikh Missionary Colleges, were not intended to proselytize, but to edify and propagate a Khalsa identity and ideals within the Sikh community.<sup>148</sup> Fenech correctly writes that the English

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<sup>147</sup> See also Dusenbery’s (1990) comparative analysis of attitudes towards conversion among Punjabi Sikhs and American Sikhs.

<sup>148</sup> Fenech 2003: 151 – 154. A visiting propagandist who organized the *Khande di pahul* at Mogul Sarai maintained that personal information of all who undergo the ceremony, including their name, address, age and previous religious belonging, will be registered and sent to the *Dharam Pracharak Committee* in Amritsar. He said the information will be used for statistics of Khalsa members, converts, and the spread of the Sikh religion.

term “conversion” bears a different connotation within the conceptual framework of the Sikhs in comparison with the idea of conversion as a radical change of beliefs, practices, and identity prevalent in Christian and Western contexts.<sup>149</sup> As the following chapter will discuss further, Sikhs in Varanasi will attribute different meanings to the initiation ceremony to Khalsa (*Khande di pahul*) depending upon their own motives for undergoing it. For those born and brought up in Sikh families the decision to adopt a Khalsa identity does not imply a change of religious identity, but is understood as a religious refinement, to become “completed” Sikhs, by fully committing oneself to the Gurus’ teaching and discipline. This perception, however, differs slightly from that of Hindu converts. Outer missionary work intended to win people from other faiths to the Sikh religion do exist in the rural areas surrounding Varanasi. These activities are carried out by Sikh propagandists (*pracharak*), many of which are themselves converts who have pursued studies and training at Sikh missionary institutes and are self-employed or granted small fees from the gurdwaras for creating public awareness.<sup>150</sup> The propagandists will carefully point out that Sikhism is not a proselytizing religion. Instead they will cast their work as “propaganda” (*prachar*) of the Sikh religion and “social projects” (*seva*) that aim to help especially low-caste Hindus escape the discriminatory caste system and hoist their honour and status by “decorating” them as Sikhs. In the course of my fieldwork I met with a few of the local propagandists operating in rural districts as well as converts who had adopted a Khalsa identity because of their propaganda work. Their stories illustrate that social motivation is the driving power of religious conversion.

In 2001 the elderly Baba Shiv Ram was working as a propagandist in villages outside Varanasi district (Jaunpur and Ghazipur) and occasionally visited the city to collect fees from the gurdwara and visit friends. Baba Shiv Ram completed a three-year-long Sikh missionary course at Amritsar in the 1970s and since then worked as a propagandist mainly in the Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. He made the decision to dedicate his life to missionary work among Hindus on the lower strata of the social hierarchy after having witnessed caste discriminations and heard about mass-conversion of untouchables to Christianity. On his own initiative he started to go about in rural areas and assembled low caste Hindus and Christian proselytes to

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<sup>149</sup> Fenech 2003: 155. It should also be noted that the ways in which Sikhs may perceive the *Khande di pahul* ceremony do not drastically differ from all Christian traditions and especially not some of the Protestant, in which the term “conversion” signifies the admission to Christianity and the church marked by the ritual of adult baptism. Although missionary activities to convert people of other religions to Christianity have been a cornerstone of the Christian churches, the term “conversion” also implies a spiritual regeneration of those who are already born into Christian families and thus not a radical change of religious identity.

<sup>150</sup> As I was told by a propagandist who visited Mogul Sarai in 2001, personal information of all who undergo the ceremony, including their name, address, age, and previous religious belonging, will be registered and sent to the *Dharam Pracharak Committee* at Amritsar. The information will be used for statistics of *Khalsa* members, converts, and the spread of the Sikh religion.



propagate the Sikh religion. For Baba Shiv Ram the motivation and benefits of adopting a Sikh identity was primarily social achievements:

The main reason for becoming a Sikh is the caste system. Before they were *chamar* [leather workers]. They saw the behaviour of people [towards them], so that is why they changed themselves. They saw that no one was accepting water from their hands, because they were untouchables. The Brahmins disapproved of things in their villages. They did not eat at the place of these people, not even in the second village away from them. Only in a third village [away from the *chamars*] they would eat. In Punjab people never treat the *chamars* as untouchables. When a *chamar* prepares food the housewife will give this food to her husband. Over there a *chamar* feels that food from his hand is accepted. Here in U.P. [Uttar Pradesh] people beware of untouchables. *Chamars* are considered untouchable in humanity.

When out on mission journeys his tactics were first to make the audience aware of the social discriminations they are exposed to and then speak about the respect and honor people would attain in the Sikh religion. In these discourses he expounded his arguments of equality and justice from a religious framework and intertwined references to the *Rigveda* with excerpts from *Ramcharitmanas* to demonstrate the ideological foundation of discriminations in the Hindu society. The break of injustice came with the social reformism of Sikhism and the Bhakti movement in medieval times: "Kabir Das, he told that everyone comes from a mother's womb. Ask the Brahmins where they come from! Can they tell? Guru Gobind Singh ji answered, everyone comes from human. There is no caste, everyone is equal", he exemplified his oratory. To make the audience take interest in the Sikh religion Baba Shiv Ram emphasized that Sikhism, unlike Christianity, is a religion of "freedom" and does not force people to abandon old customs and beliefs which they have followed prior to conversion.<sup>151</sup> To gain honor in the society he strongly encouraged neophytes to undergo the *Khande di pahul* and be adorned with the external Sikh symbols. A few of the employees working for the gurdwaras of Varanasi were low caste Hindus who converted to Sikhism after meeting with Baba Shiv Ram. A man in his twenties, formerly a *chamar* from a village in Mirzapur district, said Baba Shiv Ram came to the house of his brother-in-law and preached the benefits of Sikhism. In 1998 he and five to six other villagers followed Baba Shiv Ram to Allahabad where they underwent the Khalsa

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<sup>151</sup> Another propagandist working in Varanasi and Mirzapur district used a similar rhetoric: "When they come out of their own fold then they see the difference between Sanatana dharm and Sikh dharm. In Hindu dharm there are so many things they have to comply with, but here, in Sikh dharm, they will be free. They feel like that." To illustrate the social freedom in Sikhism he told a success story about a village boy who "Guru Nanak permitted *grihast*" – a family life. The boy was a *sadhu* and socially obliged to live in celibacy but through the conversion to Sikhism renounced his past life and got a wife, children and job in the city.

ceremony and afterwards continued to Varanasi to search for jobs.<sup>152</sup> Another man from the same caste decided to become a Sikh after having listened to Baba Shiv Ram's lecture on equality: "Baba ji said, 'accept this religion, in this religion you will get a lot of convenience. You will get honor (*izzat*)'. Immediately he started to save his hair. Baba Shiv Ram taught him the technique of tying a turban and exchanged his caste name with "Singh".

Social discrimination is not only an impetus for conversion in the rhetoric of a Sikh propagandist but real experiences which motivate people to leave their villages and past lives behind. A middle-aged man from the carpenter caste (*tarkhan*) said he could easily get the 1500 rupees he earned monthly on the gurdwara employment in the Hindu society, but he would never get respect. In his home district the village of the Brahmins and the village of carpenters were clearly separated. Whenever family members went to the other village to ask for work the Brahmins would let them sit outside the house and wait three to four hours before they replied yes or no. After a fight with the Brahmins he took refuge in the gurdwaras in Varanasi and decided to stay. When I asked him what would happen if he went back to the village now as a Sikh, he answered:

I would not go to them. Even if they would invite me I would not go. We cannot call them by name. If we would do that they would kill us. Here I am sitting with the Bhai Sahib ji, but in the village it would not be like this. Now they call me Sardar ji. That is all I want. I got that from here. I am not greedy for money. I am just greedy for human respect.

For this man, like many others, conversion to Sikhism was not simply a strategy to move upwards the social caste hierarchy but a way to achieve human dignity and respect that he strongly felt he had been deprived from. Another interlocutor who did return to his native village confirmed that the new Sikh identity did not entail higher social status in the eyes of the Brahmins, but instead they reported him to the police for wearing a dagger in a public place.

Although the motives for adherence to the Sikh religion varies and are always individual, for low caste Hindus social factors are the driving force behind religious conversion, which represents incorporation into a new social community, and for many a new social identity and life. One man simply said he entered the Sikh fold for social reasons, but the Sikh Gurus and their teaching he got to know about afterwards, from discourses in the gurdwara. Propagandist like Baba Shiv Ram stresses the importance of adopting a Khalsa identity because it allows for a formal break with previous caste taboos and external identity markers that are replaced with Sikh symbols and names.

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<sup>152</sup> One informant claimed that more than a hundred Hindus from different villages in U.P. took *amrit* on that occasion in Allahabad.

The Khalsa ceremony itself is pregnant with symbolism to mark this transformation. Verbally the neophyte confirms the abandonment of his or her previous social belonging and the passage into a new identity within a community that ideologically promotes social equality. The primal act of the ceremony – when neophytes from different social strata drink and are sprinkled with sanctified nectar-water from the same pot – embodies this idea and stands as a symbolic opposite to the rules against caste interdining associated with traditional Hinduism. To sit together and share sanctified substances with people of different castes is probably the most explicit symbolic expression of a break with caste taboos and, from the viewpoint of many untouchables, the symbolic end to discrimination. The act of taking nectar-water is considered to cleanse individuals from their social past and the new Khalsa discipline they are to observe will make them pure: they are expected to do daily readings of *gurbani* hymns, abstain from alcohol and tobacco, and follow new dining rules. In practice this means that Khalsa Sikhs may offer food to the whole community even if they themselves are not likely to accept eatables or drinkables from other Sikhs who have not undergone the Khalsa ceremony. The converts, who were carriers of pollution in the Hindu society, will thus enter a new community in which they share spaces, interdine, attend marriages and celebrate festivals with people of different backgrounds. The external Sikh symbols become significant identity markers in interaction with the surrounding majority society. Since the Sikhs in Varanasi are associated with the Khatri or Kshatriya caste, people who only recognize the recruits by their religious affiliation may even attribute them an ethnic identity as Punjabi Sikhs and social status of Khatri. They will be addressed as “Sardar ji”, or “respected chieftain”, which is an honorific appellative widely used for a Sikh.

Although a new religious identity opens up for social opportunities, hierarchies and differentiations based on caste belonging are still prevalent within the local community. Inside the gurdwara the Hindu converts will be treated with respect as equals, according to the dominant norm within that space, but they often come to occupy posts as laborers to Punjabi Sikhs of higher castes with whom they do not intermarry. Most of the unskilled employees in the gurdwaras of Varanasi are Hindu villagers of low caste background. The gurdwara provide shelter and a small salary in exchange of responsibilities for daily duties, such as cleaning and preparing food, while the gurdwara committee with Punjabi Sikhs of a higher social strata remain their patrons and employers.

#### SINDHI MERCHANTS

An important segment of the Sikh community in Varanasi is made up Sindhi families, who trace their ethnic and cultural belonging to the province Sindh in the present Pakistan. The majority of Hindu Sindhis migrated from Sindh in connection with the partition in 1947 and came to establish themselves as a prosperous merchant community in different parts of India and abroad. Before the partition the social identity of Sindhis were bound up with caste belonging and the regions from which the families

originated. Generally the Hindu Sindhis have been grouped under three basic categories: *Lohana*, *Bhatia* and *Brahmin*, of which the former comprises a bulk of divergent Vaishya *jatis*, who share the claim of Kshatriya origin and the cult of Jhulelal. Except for the Brahmins, who were and still are ritual specialists, the major part of Sindhi *jatis* are involved in trading and commerce of different kinds.<sup>153</sup> Equally important to a Sindhi identity is clan membership (*bradari*) and ancestry. Most Sindhi family names end with “-ani”, which signifies “descendant of” and indicates the patrilineal origin from a male ancestor, while other Sindhi surnames will denote the place of origin or occupation.<sup>154</sup>

After the migration from Pakistan the Sindhis have attempted to construe a global Sindhi identity that subsumes social differences of caste and regional belonging, even if traditional social rules still plays a significant role when arranging marriages. As Falzon (2004) argues, the idea of a “Sindhiness” has become the primary identity marker in contemporary Diaspora communities which distinguishes Sindhis from other people in different local contexts and nurses the feeling of belonging to a single community and a shared cultural and ethnic group.<sup>155</sup> The reconstruction of an all-embracing Sindhi identity, however, does not necessarily rest on the imagination of a “homeland” or religious belonging – elements that are fundamental to a Punjabi Sikh identity. Thapan (2002) notes that the older generations of Sindhi Hindus may still consider the province Sindh as a lost “homeland”, but due to social mobility and the transnational character of contemporary Sindhi communities the younger generations will claim multiple homelands that are located in different parts of the world. As Thapan puts it, they let “their communities around the world represent a “homeland” without a territory.”<sup>156</sup> It is an imagined homeland located on the symbolic level. The cultural material articulated in the creation and maintenance of the modern Sindhi identity implies a shared history, specific language, literature, and in more recent decades, rituals and symbols related to the cult of Jhulelal.

The religious world of the Sindhis is a complex matter. According to Thapan the majority of the population in Sindh converted to Islam between the tenth and fourteenth century, followed by Sufi influences in the sixteenth century.<sup>157</sup> Sindhi Hindus, on the other hand, have combined different beliefs and practices of the Hindu and Sikh traditions, assimilated with devotion to regional saints, Gods and Sufi *pirs*. A major part of the Sindhi Hindus would in fact call themselves *Nanak-panthis*, followers of the teaching of Guru Nanak, in addition to their worship of Gods and Goddesses associated with the mainstream Hinduism. The religious life of Sindhis, however, cannot simply be comprehended as an amalgam of regional Hindu and Sikh beliefs and practices that historically have developed by accretion and reconciliation through interaction with the different traditions. Neither would it be correct to clas-

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<sup>153</sup> Falzon 2004: 32.

<sup>154</sup> Falzon 2004: 36, Thapan 2002: 15.

<sup>155</sup> Falzon 2004: 38.

<sup>156</sup> Thapan 2002: 2.

<sup>157</sup> Thapan 2002: 16.

sify their religion as a synthesis that is combining divergent beliefs and practices in a somewhat coherent system. The Sindhi religious life is more inclusive and could possibly be labeled a complementary syncretism, in the sense that within their worldview the distinct features of local and regional cults, Hindu and Sikh beliefs remain distinguishable, yet able to complement each other within one and the same framework.<sup>158</sup> Perceptions of religious identities display these syncretic features. Although the distinct ethnic identity is Sindhi, they may claim to have a double religious identity as both Hindus and Sikhs, or say they are Hindus who follow the Sikh teaching in the Guru Granth Sahib.

When I asked some of my Sindhi friends in Varanasi what differentiated them from Hindus and Sikhs respectively, they referred to cultural disparities such as the Sindhi language, regional customs, and the cult of Jhulelal. Religion, on the contrary, was a denominator they shared with both Hindus and Sikhs, emphasizing that Sindhis have never tried to attain any stricter religious boundaries of their own. A young businessman explained that Sindhis and Sikhs are children of the same mother and therefore alike, with exception of the external symbols of *Amritdhari* Sikhs. Recent studies on Sindhis in the Diaspora show that the degree to which Sindhis are attached to Sikhism varies between families and is changing due to politics in local communities and influences of Hindu nationalism, popular Hinduism and modern movements, such as Chinmaya Mission, Sai Baba, and Radhasoami, on the younger generation.<sup>159</sup> It is still typical of many Sindhi families that they share the belief in the Guru Granth Sahib and many ritual practices with the Sikhs. In Sindhi temples a copy of Guru Granth Sahib may be solemnly installed besides statues of Hindu deities and Jhulelal.<sup>160</sup> Devotees may perform readings from the Sikh scripture, get married either

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<sup>158</sup> Based on a study of Sindhis at Lucknow, Ramey (2007) notes that they contest the dominant definitions of religious traditions. As he argues, the label “syncretism” is not always suitable to explain the Sindhi religious life, since it implicitly validates the dominant definitions. The word syncretism usually signifies the processes by which an understanding of a religion undergoes change and blends diverse religious elements. The Sindhi informants in his survey would not identify their religion as merely a conscious blend of various elements, but perceived their practices to represent an original and all-encompassing form of Hinduism. From my field experiences at Varanasi, I do not find the contest of standard definitions exclusive for the Sindhis, but typical of many Hindu and Sikh perceptions of the Hindu tradition. I believe Ramey makes a significant distinction between the dominant community definitions of religions and the practices by which community members live. “Many members of a community effectively participate in a varied group of religious practices and ideas, accepting some aspects of the dominant practices and ideas of their group and combining them with ideas and practices from other groups or traditions”, he writes (Ramey 2007: 6). To represent the religion and to live the religion are two analytically separate things.

<sup>159</sup> Falzon 2004: 54 – 55; Thapan 2002: 163 ff.

<sup>160</sup> Thapan reports that the Sindhi temple in Manila held three versions of Guru Granth Sahib (in Gurmukhi, Devanagari and Sindhi) that were installed on a platform side by side to a volume of the four Vedas in Sanskrit. The temple is a case in point of how the Sindhis have blended Sikh, Hindu, Western and regional practices, that are performed and managed by a Sikh *granthi* and a

by the Sikh *Anand karaj* ceremony or the Vedic fire ritual, and observe both Sikh and Hindu festivals. In Sindhi homes one often finds popular bazaar posters of Guru Nanak hanging beside images of Vishnu, Jhulelal, Buddha, and Jesus.

The major part of Sindhis who I met in the city would confirm their devotion to Guru Nanak and the Sikh scripture, even if the majority would not subscribe to the institution of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh. One Sindhi family especially had gained a local reputation for contributions to the Sikh community and was reckoned by the Sikhs as *premis*, or true “lovers” of the Guru and the Guru’s place. The late father of the family had arrived in the city shortly after the partition and came to establish a retail business in textiles and *sarees*. He and his wife had a daughter but for some reasons were unable to have any more children. After eighteen barren years the wife went to Nichibagh Gurdwara to pray for a son to maintain the family lineage. As her sons retold her experience, she “got *darshan* of the Guru in sound”; she heard a voice telling that if she would “donate” her future children to the Sikh religion she would be gifted with many sons. The woman made the promise to do this, and in the years to follow she gave birth to three sons who were raised to be Sikhs. The couple established a gurdwara in their private house which was named *Guru Nanak Bhawan*, or the “the house of Guru Nanak”. In gratitude to the Guru’s place the woman offered her golden bangles as a secret donation (*gupt dan*) to Gurubagh Gurdwara on her deathbed to be used for the reconstruction of a garden within the gurdwara complex. The sons remained *keshdhari* Sikhs until the 1980s when they, due to the anti-Sikhs riots and the political turmoil, decided to have their hair cut. At that time the oldest son of the family was a retailer of Sikh calendars imported from Singapore. When the police discovered that the day of Operation Blue Star was marked as a memorial day in these calendars they searched the family house, confiscated tapes and other media related to Sikhism, and put the oldest son in prison for seven months. The police searched connections with separatists in Punjab, but the proceedings were withdrawn when no damning evidence was found. In response to these events, all of the three sons sheared and ceremonially donated their hair (*kesh dan*) to Ganga by immersing it into the river at the three major Hindu pilgrimage centers: Varanasi, Allahabad, and Haridwar. They remained active in the Sikh community and arranged religious programs, at the same time as they followed particular Hindu and Sindhi practices in the family. When I revisited Varanasi in 2005 the younger son had decided to observe the Khalsa vows again and let his hair grow out.

Characteristic of the Sindhi identity and worship in modern times is the cult and veneration of the patron saint Jhulelal. Earlier the cult of Jhulelal was associated with a group called *Daryapanthis* in Sindh and after the partition became the popular patron saint or God for all Sindhis.<sup>161</sup> According to Falzon, Sindhis in Bombay rein-

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Hindu Brahman within one and the same temple (Thapan 2002: 163 – 170). Ramey (2007) provides another example of how Sindhis in Lucknow are worshipping the Guru Granth Sahib at their temple *Hari Om Mandir*.

<sup>161</sup> Thapan and Falzon mention that Jhulelal also was a saint of waterways and travellers for Muslims, who called him Khwaja Khizr (Thapan 2002: 17 – 18; Falzon 2004: 58 – 59).

vented Jhulelal as the prime God of the Sindhi people in the 1950s under leadership of the singer and professor Ram Panjwami. Temples to the patron saint were constructed and narratives, pictures, songs, prayers, and rituals were recreated and distributed worldwide to forge a shared “Sindhiness”.<sup>162</sup> The revival of the cult of Jhulelal occurred in times of social unrest when it was perceived crucial to maintain culture and ethnic borders. The patron saint came to stand as a marker of an ethnic and cultural Sindhi identity.

At a turning away from Luxa Road, not far from Gurubagh Gurdwara, the local Sindhi community in Varanasi has constructed a temple called *Jhulelal Mandir Sindhi*, which holds a sizeable statue of Jhulelal in the sacrosanct centre. The iconography of Jhulelal commonly depicts him as bearded old man who is either standing on a fish in the Indus River, or sitting cross-legged on a lotus placed on a fish. Sometimes Jhulelal will hold a rosary, read a sacred text, and has one hand risen in a protective gesture towards the observer. The myths of Jhulelal exist in many variations. Local Sindhis will say Jhulelal is either a saint or a deity, more specifically venerated as the Vedic God of waters – Varuna – or an incarnation of Vishnu. A young businessman in Varanasi rendered a legend, according to which goddess Durga gave birth to two sons: one was Jhulelal, from whom the Sindhi castes originated, and the other was Guru Nanak who created the Sikhs. A more popular myth, which is printed in Devanagri script in small-sized pamphlets and distributed free of charge at *Jhulelal Mandir Sindhi*, takes place in the eleventh century when Sindh was under Muslim rule.<sup>163</sup> The legend tells how Jhulelal appeared from the Sindh River and saved the Hindus from Muslim oppression – a theme which appeals to the modern history of the partition and migration from the homeland in Pakistan. A young Sindhi woman said the story about Jhulelal’s rescue of Hindus in the past has helped Sindhis to restore their lives and culture in foreign countries. “We pray to all Gods, but when we think of our grandfathers and grandmothers we pray to Jhulelal”, she said. For Sindhi communities scattered all over India and the world the cult of Jhulelal is able to unite them in a

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<sup>162</sup> Falzon 2004: 60.

<sup>163</sup> As this myth narrates, the tyrannical ruler Markshah, based in the town Thete, decided to convert all Hindus in the province of Sindh to Islam. If he succeeded in this task, he was promised an easier passage to heaven. The Hindus asked for a respite of three days, promising that they would convert by free will if no supernatural power inferred within these days. Markshah accepted their condition. When all the Hindus gathered at the bank of river Sind in prayer, Jhulelal appeared from the water, sitting on fish, adorned with a crown, holding a rosary in his hand, and promised that he would be born as a son in the home of name Ratanray in Nazarpur to save them. A child with supernatural powers called Uderolal was born and when the ruler Markshah found out from astrologers that the baby was a divine being he decided to convert all Hindus to Islam and ordered his minister Yusuf to poison and imprison the child. The minister realized the divineness of the child and sought help from Jhulelal, who appeared as a warrior and accompanied the minister when he confronted Markshah. With the help of the god of winds and fire Jhulelal created terrible disasters and finally conquered the Muslim army and ruler, who were forced to humbly ask for forgiveness. The Hindus were spared and freedom of religion was established in Sindh. The story is published in Hindi by Tripathi 1995.

shared ethnic identity and create meaningful links to a Sindhi culture in a mythical past.

A major festival celebrated by the Sindhi community in Varanasi is *Jhulelal Jey-anti*, the birthday of Jhulelal which occurs on the first day of the month *Chet* (March/April). On this day hundreds of Sindhis will attend *Jhulelal Mandir Sindhi* to take *darshan* and present offerings to the patron saint. After sunset the community will take out an icon of Jhulelal in procession and walk along the main streets of Varanasi towards river Ganga. The statue is mounted on a decorated float accompanied with pictures and live-performances depicting the life of the saint and other aspects of the Sindhi culture held significant. The procession will end at the main ghat at Dashashwamedh where Jhulelal is ceremonially consigned to the river Ganga.

## 1.2. ORGANIZING COMMUNAL ACTIVITIES

The arrival of Punjabi Sikhs in Varanasi during the years surrounding the partition involved major changes in the Sikh community of Varanasi. To local Sikhs the partition often stands as a dividing line between an old community run by Hindu saints and a new community of Punjabi Sikhs who provided the Guru Granth Sahib with proper respect. The two historical shrines in memory of Guru Nanak's and Guru Tegh Bahadur's visits in the city – Gurubagh Gurdwara and Nichibagh Gurdwara – had been under control of mahants in the Udasin and Nirmala traditions and were now transferred to a committee of Punjabi traders and migrants who altered ritual practices and reconstructed the shrines. The emic historiography on the Sikhs in Varanasi briefly remarks that “many years ago” the gurdwaras were under management of Udasin mahants and “after great struggles and tortures” were accrued to the Sikhs.<sup>164</sup> The struggle for power over the two Sikh shrines in control of Hindu priests makes a part of the collective memory.<sup>165</sup> Official records on the gurdwara buildings in Varanasi and memory histories reported by elderly community members provide a picture that confirms a take-over by Punjabi Sikhs, however, accounts that the transfer of power occurred by more peaceful means.

The following sections will provide a brief summary of the establishment of a local Sikh management committee for the gurdwaras. In memory histories there are particularly two leading Sikhs – a saintly devotee and a successful businessman – who re-shaped the religious life to Sikh standards. A search for the Sikh history in Varanasi would be incomplete without their mentioning, even if I will only sketch the contours of their life stories in brief. The remaining part of this section introduces the managing committee of the two main gurdwaras in Varanasi and Sikh institutions in the city.

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<sup>164</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihasik Yadan*, p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> Just like the Gurdwara Reform Movement in the 1920s is for the broader Sikh community.



## HISTORY OF THE GURDWARA COMMITTEE

Assessment lists for taxes on the annual value of buildings belonging to Nichibagh and Gurubagh Gurdwara between 1927 and 1940 inform us that up to 1932 the two shrines were in the care of a Nirmala Mahant named Mahakund Singh, along with his two disciples Ishwer Singh and Sunder Singh. The ninth Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur was officially registered as the chieftain (*malik*) of both places and the temple buildings were recorded as “Sadhu residences”.<sup>166</sup>

Elderly community members who resided in Varanasi during the 1930s and 1940s recollected that Gurubagh Gurdwara, in memory of Guru Nanak, was taken care of by an Udasin ascetic, while the Nirmala mahant was in charge of Nichibagh and most likely exercised administrative control of both shrines. The ascetics at Gurubagh Gurdwara supported themselves with land properties. One interlocutor claimed the gurdwara owned around 52 *bigha* of land, corresponding to thirty acres, which was gradually sold out to Rama Krishna Mission, Central School, Annie Besant Theosophical Society and other purchasers. Revenues were also collected from fruit trade. A common reminiscence of Gurubagh is the luxuriant greenery surrounding the gurdwara. The Guru’s garden was a forest with jujube, bamboos, rose-apple and *nim* trees and large numbers of guava, mango, lemon, and tamarind trees were grown. The gurdwara of Gurubagh was only a small room with a platform that marked out the place where Guru Nanak occupied his seat. An elderly man, who in his teens was a regular visitor in the gurdwara, remembered that in the 1930s the “sadhus” in Gurubagh used to keep Guru Granth Sahib wrapped in cloth on a small table but did not know how to read the Gurmukhi script. In the evening they were performing an *Arti* ceremony with oil-lamps and bells and distributed sanctified food made of chickpeas (*chana*) to people.

According to official records, ten Nirmala sants founded in 1932 a managing committee to supervise the two buildings at Nichibagh and Gurubagh.<sup>167</sup> The mahant Mahakund Singh died and his successor Ishwer Singh apparently saw the need for administrative changes. From a letter signed by an official at the Municipal Corporation in 1949 it is evident that most of the members of the temple committee were of old age and expired within a ten-year period. As stated in this letter, on his own violation Mahant Ishwar Singh decided to hand over the administration and rights of the

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<sup>166</sup> See *Assessment List for Taxes on the Annual Value of Buildings and Lands*, for House No. CK 58/2 (old 37/24) and B. 21/10 (old 21/5,6) for 1927 – 1935 and 1945 – 1951. All historical records between year 1927 and 1976 are kept in Maha Palika, the archive of the Municipal Corporation in Varanasi, whereas documents after 1976 are kept at the local police offices (*thana*) for the wards of the city.

<sup>167</sup> The names listed are Makund Singh Kumar, Nand Lal, Sahel Rai Bahadur, Ishwar Singh, Sardar Ishwar Singh, M.B.EB Bisheshwar Singh, Sardar Gopal Singh, Sardar Ram Singh, B. Ram Narain Singh and L.B. Jayanti. See *Assessment List for Taxes on the Annual Value of Buildings and Lands* for House No. CK 58/2 (old 37/24) and B. 21/10 (old 21/5,6) for the periods 1927 – 1935 and 1935 – 1940. The establishment of the gurdwara committee is found in the enclosed File no. 2640, 8/2, 1932.

trustee to another newly founded committee by the Sikhs, simply because members of the old management were dying out. The name of the new committee was called *Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Kashi* and later changed the name to *Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee Banares* (SGPCB). The official day of transfer was December 27 in 1942.<sup>168</sup> The board members of the new management committee for Gurubagh and Nichibagh gurdwaras were no longer “sadhus” but Sikh professionals and businessmen. For instance, Ram Narayan Singh, an advocate, held the post as vice president, and Sundar Singh, a doctor who ran a clinic at Visheshwarganj, worked as the general secretary.<sup>169</sup> The gurdwara committee was officially registered at the Municipal Corporation in 1951. From this year all gurdwara buildings related to Nichibagh and Gurubagh were under the management of the local independent Sikh committee which later changed its name to *Varanasi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (VGPC).<sup>170</sup> In connection with the five-hundredth anniversary of Guru Nanak in 1969 the Guru was recorded as the chieftain (*malik*) of Gurubagh, while Guru Tegh Bahadur formally remained the proprietor of Nichibagh.<sup>171</sup>

### REMOLDING SPACES AND PRACTICES

For community members with a pre-partition past in Varanasi the year of 1942 signifies an important moment in history. It is the point in time when the Gurus’ territories were transferred from “sadhus” to “Sardar jis” and the religious practices changed from “improper” Hindu rituals to proper ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib. In a culture that mass-produces hagiographical literature of great saints, politicians, artists and other public figures, it is not surprising to find that the collective group suspends their common history by achievements of a few exemplary individuals and events, and not the disparate and sometimes conflicting deeds of the broad masses. In conversations on the history of Sikh community in Varanasi considerably many of my interlocutors tended to structure their memory of the public religious life on stories about individuals who had played prominent roles for the community. Except for

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<sup>168</sup> *Assessment List for Taxes on the Annual Value of Buildings and Lands*, House no B21/10, 1952 – 1955. Enclosed File no. B857, 1949, 16/6, 1951. An elderly Sikh man, who was in his twenties when the transfer occurred, confirmed that the four Udasin “sadhus” who lived in Gurubagh died without any successors.

<sup>169</sup> Some of the official records on SGPCB were missing in the archive at the Municipal Corporation in Varanasi since they were being used for court cases.

<sup>170</sup> After the partition the local authorities introduced new rules in registration of religious communities. Because the SGPCB was not registered, the Municipal Corporation found difficulties in collecting taxes from the gurdwara buildings and sent several notices to the board. *Assessment List for Taxes on the Annual Value of Buildings and Lands*, House no B21/10, 1952 – 1955. House no B21/10, 1952 – 1955, pp. 176 – 177; House no B21/10, 10 a, 1967 – 1972, pp. 129 – 130; House no CK 58/2, 1967 – 1976; Enclosed File no. B857, 1949, 16/6, 1951.

<sup>171</sup> *Assessment List for Taxes on the Annual Value of Buildings and Lands*, House no B21/10, 1967 – 1972, pp. 129 – 130.

venerated family members, who naturally will be part of personal reminiscences, two persons in particular recurred in these narratives: the saint-like Laina Singh who refined Sikh practices in the gurdwaras and converted Hindus to Sikhism, and the successful businessman Ajit Singh Sabharwal who shaped new institutions and represented the community to the outer world. Today these two individuals have almost become mythogenic in the community and their remembered deeds correspond to the Sikh ideals of a saint-soldier (*sant-sipahi*): one who inwardly reshaped religious practices and beliefs, and the other who built up the institutional infrastructure and managed outwardly struggles. Their life-stories should be briefly sketched.

Laina Singh originated from a village in Kashmir where he worked as *granthi* in the local gurdwara. By a coincidence a man named Mehinder Singh visited the village in the 1940s, and after listening to Laina's devotional singing and preaching on Sikhism invited him to Varanasi. Mehinder Singh introduced him to the then president of the newly established gurdwara committee and he was consequently asked to take charge of Gurubagh Gurdwara as a *granthi* – a post he occupied until his death in 1973. For Laina the coming to Varanasi turned out to be a return to the ancestral home. One of his five sons told that Laina went to Hardwar and paid 60 rupees to a *pandha*, a Brahmin registrar of genealogies, to go over the ancestry chart (*shajra nasab*) of their family. It was found out that Laina was the fifth generation of lineal descendants to a learned Brahmin scholar in Varanasi named Ganga Ram. Subsequently Laina took lessons in Sanskrit with a *Nirmala* sant and the family changed their *gotra* name to "Pandey". Local Sikhs come to address him as the "Pandit" – the learned scholar. Laina's family and elderly people who still commemorate his work at Varanasi confirmed his spiritual nature and dedication. His son recalled:

My father was totally devoted to worship reading (*puja path*) and did not take interest in other things. He used to get up at 3 in the morning and go to Ganga to take a dip and came back to do *Prakash* of Guru Granth Sahib ji. Then he performed devotional music (*kirtan*) from 5.30 to 8 o'clock. My father was doing everything by himself. In the gurdwara there were only three employees; one was my father, one was an old man who played tabla and then the man preparing food. All accounts and everything were taken care of by my father.

Elderly residents remembered that Laina Singh brought about major changes in the ritual life of Gurubagh Gurdwara: he removed the bell and oil-lamp which the Udasin sants have used for the *Arti* ceremony and instead brought a whisk (*chauri*) to pay respect to the Guru Granth Sahib which now was installed daily by the *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* ceremonies (See Chapter 2). On Sunday mornings he arranged longer services with devotional music and distribution of blessed food (*karah prashad*). As an aged man alleged, locals had never before heard of *Gurpurubs* – festivals honouring the Sikh Gurus – which now were introduced and celebrated with spectacular processions in the city (*Nagar kirtan*). Laina invited Hindus living nearby

to participate. On these occasions he would narrate stories on the Gurus, read and sing from Guru Granth Sahib, and explain the hymns in Hindi. Apparently Laina Singh was the first Sikh to organize the Khalsa ceremony (*Khande di pahul*) in Varanasi and converted a considerable number of Hindus to Sikhism. In these reminiscences Laina Singh is ascribed the credit for introducing Sikh practices in the gurdwaras and charismatically attracted local people to the Gurus' teaching. For almost thirty years he was the head *granthi* of the gurdwaras in Varanasi and trained other devotees for the occupation. The death of Laina Singh became a memorable event in the community. As his son recalled, he was cremated at the *Charan Paduka*, or the "footsteps of Vishnu" at Manikarnika Ghat where, according to Hindu mythology, Vishnu performed cosmogonic austerities to grant liberation to the city. Only saints and people of exceptionally good reputation were allowed to end life at Vishnu's footsteps before the government banned cremations on this place a few years later. More than 165 woollen shawls were offered and placed on the shroud of Laina Singh in the typical Punjabi custom to honour a deceased.

Ajit Singh Sabharwal originated from the village Dhudhiyal in the district Jhelam in the present Pakistan. After pursuing a bachelor degree in Economics from Gordon College at Rawalpindi he and his family arrived in Varanasi after the partition in 1947. Within a short time he established a tyre company, and later a national petroleum and transport business that proved profitable. His qualities of leadership secured him an influential position in the Sikh community. For more than three decades Sabharwal served as the president for *Uttar Pradesh Sikh Representative Board* in Lucknow and was a member and secretary of the gurdwara committee of the neighboring pilgrimage center at Patna Sahib. From the end of 1960s up to his death in 2002 he was the obvious president of the gurdwara committee in Varanasi (VGPC). An informant remembered that Sabharwal decided to commit himself to community work after he had read two hymns of Guru Gobind Singh which Laina Singh gave him. Initially Sabharwal was hesitant about leading the gurdwara management because of his business. According to my informant Sabharwal supposedly said to the committee: "You will get as many donations you want, but no one from my family will be president". When Laina Singh discovered that Sabharwal was hesitant he wrote him a letter with the two hymns. Sabharwal was persuaded, as he perceived the verses of Guru Gobind Singh as a divinely order, to engage in selfless service to the congregation and the house of the Guru. In connection with the five-hundred anniversary of Guru Nanak's birthday in 1969 the Sikh community elected a new gurdwara committee and Sabharwal was appointed to be president. In retrospect people often give Sabharwal the credit for building up the infrastructure of communal activities. Under his presidency a new gurdwara hall of Gurubagh Gurdwara was constructed and inaugurated in November 1969 with eminent people invited, such as the state poet of Punjab Inderjit Singh Tulsi. The charitable hospital at Gurubagh and the two Khalsa schools providing primary education up to college level at Gurubagh and Shivpur are similarly ascribed to his generous donations and selfless work (*sewa*). Memorial marble tablets decorating the exterior walls of gurdwaras in and around

the city testify that Sabharwal was a significant benefactor for the establishment of religious institutions. In the case of *Singh Sabha Gurdwara* at Diesel Locomotive Work (See below), for instance, he and his family alone contributed almost the same amount as the whole Sikh community altogether. With reputed membership in several social, educational and trading associations on national and local level, Sabharwal bridged co-operation with the outward society and represented the Sikh community in public discourses until his death in 2002.

Unanimously my interlocutors asserted that *bhakti bhavna*, or sincere devotion, had been in constant increase in the Sikh community for the last fifty years. This development has been noticeable in the escalation of religious practices, such as the arrangements of recitations from Guru Granth Sahib, a growing interest in religious propaganda, and people's adoption of the normative Khalsa identity. "People have more trust in religion nowadays", a middle-aged male interlocutor said. In the local setting the mounting devotion is considered to have been preconditioned by the works of Laina Singh and Ajit Sabharwal. They exchanged Hindu practices in the Guru's house with pure Sikh worship and built up spaces and institutions for religious and social work in compliance with the Sikh teaching.

#### SIKH INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The day to day running of the two main gurdwaras in Varanasi – Gurubagh and Nichibagh – is at the present controlled by the managing committee, *Varanasi Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (VGPC). The committee consists of 55 members who are selected by the chairman and the general secretary. Every fifth year the congregation holds a democratic election of the chairman, and the person elected for the post will, after due deliberations with other board members, appoint a committee. Except for a few intermissions Ajit Singh Sabharwal occupied the chairmanship from the end of 1960s up to his death in 2002, and was succeeded by the former president Jaswant Singh Dang, a follower of the *Namdhari* tradition. In total the selected executive committee includes nineteen commissions with different areas of responsibility (See Figure 5). The store secretary, for instance, is responsible for the organization of the communal kitchen (*langar*) and keeps daily records of donations, expenses of food and other items. The stage secretary arranges the religious programs, upon which he has a censorial function and is entitled to rectify performers in the gurdwara if they are misinterpreting Sikh doctrines or in any way try to discredit Sikhism. Jointly the committee works as the employer of all paid workers in

BOARD MEMBERS OF THE VGPC  
 Chairman  
 President  
 Five Assistant Presidents  
 General Secretary  
 Joint General Secretary  
 Auditor  
 Treasurer  
 Office Secretary at Gurubagh  
 Office Secretary at Nichibagh  
 State Secretary at Nichibagh.  
 Stage Secretary  
 Two Building Secretaries  
 Secretary of Religious Propaganda  
 Store Secretary

Figure 5.

the gurdwaras.

Every individual who considers him- or herself as a Sikh by religion and has lived in Varanasi for more than two years can be registered as a community member and has the right to vote in the congregational elections.<sup>172</sup> Normally the elections of the chairman are conducted on majority: all community members gather in the gurdwara and cast their vote either by ballot-papers or raising hands. In practice, however, it is more often adequate to simply ask the congregation during programs if they object to the nominated committee. Individual Sikhs who want to run for board membership should preferably be *Amritdhari*, even if this requirement works more like a normative instruction rather than a strict rule.<sup>173</sup> Board members and the working committee do not receive any monetary compensation from the gurdwara but work on a non-profit basis as a form of selfless service (*seva*). In one year the chairman of VGPC and committee members will arrange between 15 and 20 meetings to discuss matters related to religious programs, court cases, properties, and so on. At least one quarter of the committee members must attend each meeting to make it valid. VGPC has been registered in court since the 1980s and is today authorized to make decisions in most administrative and juridical errands of its own.

From one viewpoint the managing committee can be regarded as a modern and urbanized extension of the older system of *panchayat*, the village council with five or more members responsible for social, political and legal matters. When a Sikh woman in the time of my fieldwork publicly charged her in-laws with assault and battery, the suspected male perpetrator was summoned to the gurdwara to make a declaration of the crime in presence of five selected committee members. In this and similar cases the rural pattern of supervising social life has been recast to the contemporary setting of a local Sikh community. The five males have no legal warrant, but jointly function as an arbitrating urban *panchayat* that attempts to settle disputes between community members before reports to the police and legal proceedings.

Two important fields of administration are *Guru Nanak Hospital* and the two public schools run by the VGPC. The hospital was founded by donations and constructed within the gurdwara complex of Gurubagh as a form of selfless service to the public community and offers medical treatment and medicine at a cheap rate. In the year of 2000 the hospital had eight medical specialists and surgeons employed, in addition to nurses and midwives. Apart from medical examinations and vaccinations, the hospital offers ambulance services and has one operating theatre for surgical operations.

For the purpose of providing children basic education and teaching in Punjabi language, VGPC invested land and founded two schools in the mid 1950s: *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* in Gurubagh and *Guru Nanak English School* in Shivpur, located

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<sup>172</sup> Any Sikh in Varanasi who fulfils these basic requirements may get a certificate from the gurdwara which attests his or her Sikh identity and is signed by the general secretary of VGPC. These certificates are sometimes used to improve employment opportunities.

<sup>173</sup> Even if a committee member is not *Amritdhari* they should preferably uphold the *Khalsa* regulations, such as vegetarianism and avoid consumption of alcohol and drugs.

near the airport in the outskirts of Varanasi. The committee set up a school board and appointed a Sikh woman from Kanpur, Beant Kaur, to be director of the educational establishments – a post she still occupied at the time of my fieldwork. Whereas the school in Gurubagh is affiliated to the Educational Board of Uttar Pradesh and offers primary education in Hindi medium up to class twelve, the school in Shivpur is an English Medium school allied with the Central Board of Secondary Education. The school committee of VGPC employs teachers to the two institutions, but otherwise grants the schools independence in educational matters. The students are offered teaching in Punjabi language as an optional subject and are expected to participate in annual functions organized by the gurdwaras, such as city processions and public distributions of food on the day commemorating Guru Nanak's birthday.

As a religious association VGPC is under the obligation to render accounts of assets and liabilities, which is done separately for the two gurdwaras. To provide public control of the financial position the manager and committee members make up a balance sheet of each month that is signed by the office secretary and general secretary of VGPC and published on a blackboard in the courtyard of the gurdwara. These reports give a fairly clear grasp of the items of expenditure and revenues in control of the institution, and attest that quite a substantial amount of money is put into circulation. For instance, the monthly turnover of Gurubagh Gurdwara is between two to three hundred thousand rupees and the expenses for organizing a festival like Guru Nanak's birthday usually exceed far beyond one hundred thousand rupees. The reports mirror a community, whose religious activities are firmly built upon the idea of giving monetary donations to the place of the Guru and the congregation. In November 2004, for instance, Gurubagh Gurdwara collected 62896 rupees from the charity box (*golak*) that is placed in front of Guru Granth Sahib and in which people give secret donations (*gupt dan*). In addition to these daily offerings, individual families may donate thousands of rupees for public distributions of food and arrangements of unbroken reading of Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path*) in connection with festivals and other events. The income from series of *Akhand path* forty days before the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday in 2004 amounted to 55450 rupees. Another important source of income is real estates, some donated to the gurdwara and owned by the committee. Rents from the shops surrounding the gurdwara complex in Gurubagh and incomes from other buildings usually cover the larger part of higher expenditures, such as salaries to employees. The VGPC also keeps a security fund within the organisation to cover all expenses for public distribution of food and other items in case no individual family is able to sponsor. Like many other religious communities the Sikhs in Varanasi have thus created a self-subsistent system, founded on the principle of communal service in the shape of monetary contributions and altruistic work.

BHUILI SAHIB

Since 1961 the VGPC has had administrative control of a small historical gurdwara called *Bhuili Sahib* in the village Bhuili thirty kilometers from the city of Varanasi. According to the local tradition, Guru Tegh Bahadur stayed in the village during his journey eastward in 1666. Apart from the main hall where Guru Granth Sahib is installed, the gurdwara accommodates a chamber, called *tapasthan*, in which Guru Tegh Bahadur did meditation (*tapashya*) and another room on the opposite side where the Guru kept the Sikh scripture. In the beginning of the twenty-first century the Sikh community in Varanasi constructed a hall for public distribution of food outside the main shrine.

Earlier Bhuili Sahib was managed by a village committee run by five to six Sikh families. When more than half of them moved into the city the responsibility was handed over to the VGPC. To local Sikhs Bhuili Sahib is intimately associated with a Nirmala sant from Punjab who lived in the gurdwara for many years and delivered expositions on Guru Granth Sahib. The VGPC also employed a Nihang Sikh from Kashmir to take care of the daily duties in the gurdwara. Apparently the Nihang educated villagers in Sikh teaching and martial arts, and even converted a few to the Sikh religion. For the last fifteen years Sumer Singh – a local Sikh farmer – and Lal Singh – a Nihang Sikh originally from a neighboring village – have shared the responsibility for the daily ceremonies in the gurdwara and organized programs on full moon days. Every year on a Sunday between the festivals *Holi* and *Vaisakhi* the Sikh congregation at Varanasi is invited for a program with recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib and public distribution of food. The gurdwara is also open and provides religious services for Hindu villagers. After a death Hindu families will go to the gurdwara for a last Sikh prayer (*Ardas*) in the name of the departed soul.

#### JAGGAT GANJ AND COTTON MILL

As the local history narrates, when Guru Tegh Bahadur visited Varanasi in 1666 some of his followers at Jagat Ganj, a neighborhood in the northern part of the city, invited the Guru to give a teaching. Afterwards, they handed over their own house to him.<sup>174</sup> Since 1984 and up to the time of my fieldwork this property, located close by Jagat Ganj Crossing, was barred with padlocks and looked more like a refuse dump, covered with plastic bags and leaf plates. Previously the precincts lodged a Hanuman temple. In the beginning of 1980s VGPC purchased the property and started to construct a Sikh gurdwara and shelter (*dharmshala*) for pilgrims. The building project was, however, interrupted in 1984 when local Hindus laid claims on the property. The dispute was still to be settled at time of my inquiries. Locals who were in sympathy with the Hindus said they had justly “opposed” the building plan, since the Sikhs disrespectfully removed a Hanuman statue. Supporters of the Sikhs, on the other hand, alleged that Hindu mobs violently occupied the area during the anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi and reinstated the monkey God on grounds that belonged to the Guru. VGPC brought the matter to court and local au-

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<sup>174</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihasik Yadan*, p. 13.



thorities consequently shut up the property. Twenty years later the court case was still pending and had turned into a protracted dispute between Brahmin solicitors and wealthier Sikh representatives.<sup>175</sup> Local Hindus and Sikhs were still paying respect to the sacred place by lighting incense and hanging flower garlands on locked gates.

Not far away from Jagat Ganj a colony named Cotton Mill was constructed in the mid 1980s. Today approximately twenty-five Sikh families live in this area. In beginning of the 1990s they jointly established an association called *Dashmesh Khalsa Seva* with the primary object to organize annual commemorations of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in mid-January, usually two weeks after the ordinary celebrations in the gurdwaras. By now the program in Cotton Mill, supported by voluntary donations, has become a local tradition and attracts Sikh families from all over the city. At the time of my study, members of the association set up a marquee in the colony square that acted as a temporary gurdwara for a day. They invited popular Sikh musician groups (*ragi jatha*) from Delhi or the Punjab as well as local expounders (*kathakar*) and propagandists (*pracharak*).<sup>176</sup> On this occasion the Guru Granth Sahib would be taken out in procession and traverse through the neighborhood.

#### BENARES HINDU UNIVERSITY

About five kilometres to the south of the city center of Varanasi lies the campus of Benares Hindu University (BHU). The university was founded in 1916 by Madan Mohan Malviya as an extension of the Central Hindu School established by the Irish theosophist Annie Besant in 1898. Today BHU has about 15000 students and is the largest residential university in India.

As a result of the earlier state quota system for admission to university courses, a significant number of students from Punjab pursued studies in Varanasi. Job opportunities also attracted Punjabi teachers and scholars to the city.<sup>177</sup> To provide religious and moral guidance to Sikh students living within the campus the Punjabi students and teacher organized *The Sikh Association BHU* in the 1940s. According to an agreement, the university granted the Sikh association 600 rupees a month to cover expenses for religious activities and provided a room at Seth Shiva Ratan Mohta Hostel (Rajputana Hostel) for a student gurdwara. Today an independent committee of university employed professors and two student representatives manage the association. The General Secretary of the association, Raghubir Singh, works as the *granthi* responsible for all religious duties in the gurdwara. The number of registered student members amounts to about 25 – 30 undergraduates and graduates who are specialized primarily in medicine, science, and technology. Except for the holiday season in

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<sup>175</sup> Board members of the VGPC represented the Sikhs.

<sup>176</sup> The estimated cost of the program amounted to 50000 Rupees in year 2001.

<sup>177</sup> In the 1990s the Department of Philosophy established a temporary Guru Nanak Chair for research in Sikh studies. Appointed to the post was Prof. Jodh Singh who was later transferred to the Punjabi University at Patiala.

May and June about six to seven families and a dozen students gather every Sunday in the gurdwara at Rajputana hostel to recite *Sukhmani Sahib*, perform the Sikh prayer and distribute sanctified food. A few days before the festival *Vaisakhi* – commemorating the creation of Khalsa – the association normally arranges a special lunch-program for graduating students who are given a Sikh prayer book (*gutka*) and blessings for their future career. On special events, such as Sikh festivals and the foundation day of BHU (February), the association sometimes organizes religious programs with unbroken readings of Guru Granth Sahib and devotional music.

#### DIESEL LOCOMOTIVE WORKS

In 1961 Diesel Locomotive Works (DLW) was set up in Varanasi and soon became a major manufacturer of diesel electric locomotives in Asia.<sup>178</sup> The factory was built in a southern area of Varanasi called Gugulpura and established its own township with housing areas, hospitals and schools for workers. Sikhs who migrated to Bihar and Varanasi in the time of the partition were employed at the factory and soon built their own community within its campus. By means of financial support from the Sikh community in Varanasi, the *Rajput Bradari* (brotherhood), as well as Punjabi contractors and industries in the city, the campus community purchased a property to construct a gurdwara. The foundation stone was laid in November 1970 and the gurdwara was named *Singh Sabha Gurdwara DLW Varanasi*.



*Singh Sabha Gurdwara DLW Varanasi.*

From 1978 Sardar Lav Singh and his wife Shanti Devi Kaur have worked as *granthis* and managed the local gurdwara. Like many other Sikh families in Varanasi, the couple came from Pakistan in 1946 for business in the clothing trade. They were planning to go back to their home five months later, but when the riots broke out in 1947 they decided to stay in India. Lav and Shanti never returned to see what happened with their property and home. In exchange of a monthly salary of 250 rupees, collected from local shops, they took care of the duties and ceremonies held in the gurdwara, including the daily installation of Guru Granth Sahib in the morning and the reading of *Rahiras Sahib* at sunset.

For many years Singh Sabha Gurdwara DLW Varanasi functioned as a significant meeting place for a small community of Sikhs who lived and worked at the DLW

<sup>178</sup> See DLW's web site at: [www.diesellocoworks.com](http://www.diesellocoworks.com).

campus. This changed drastically with the riots subsequent to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Shanti recalled what happened on the day after the Prime Minister's death: at 11 in the morning a mob – close to a hundred students according to her estimation – drove trucks into the campus, set the gurdwara building on fire and demolished the Sikh standard (*Nishan Sahib*). Clean shaven Punjabis and Hindu neighbors tried to stop the mob and helped the turban-wearing Sikhs to hide in their houses. Even if none were killed in the October riots at Varanasi many were severely injured by being stoned or beaten up, and their properties and belongings were burnt down. For about two weeks the police guarded the campus and shortly thereafter the Sikhs, who had governmental employment at DLW, were transferred to the Punjab. The gurdwara was reconstructed, but the community was never to be the same again. At the present the Sikh community at DLW consists of five families who meet every fortnight and at major Sikh festivals. The son of Lav and Shanti, Balwant Singh, has inherited the post as *granthi* beside his daily work of running a cloth business in the neighboring town of Ramnagar.

#### ASHOK NAGAR

In the centre of a residential colony called Ashok Nagar in Sigra, a small gurdwara of about 25 square metres is located. In pre-partition times this was mainly an inhabited forest area in the outskirts of Varanasi. When streams of people from the West Punjab arrived in the city after 1947, the local government set up about 80 quarters as aid to refugees, who subsequently purchased the tenements at a cheap rate. As the city expanded rapidly during the second half of the twentieth century Ashok Nagar was slowly annexed to the townscape. Most of the refugees who settled in the colony were Hindus, Sindhis and a few Sikh families – a social composition that has remained up to the present. On a recreation ground within the colony the Hindus erected a temple to Hanuman. The Sikh and Sindhi families likewise decided to construct a gurdwara. The residents established a committee for the local housing co-operative, *Sarchak Committee*, and agreed to build the gurdwara in a room next to the Hanuman statue. When the head of the committee, who was a Sindhi, sold a house in the area, the profit was invested in the purchase and construction of a gurdwara hall.

At the present Ashok Nagar Gurdwara bears no administrative relation to the VGPC but is run by *Sarchak Committee* with seven elected residents and members (Hindus, Sikhs and Sindhis) who are responsible for both the Sikh gurdwara and the Hindu mandir. Even if these adjacent sanctuaries collaborate and share the executive body, devotees carry out religious activities and the daily worship separately. The prime mover behind the gurdwara is Ganesh Singh, a retired postmaster who has worked as a *granthi* and organized religious programs in Ashok Nagar since 1983. At the time of my field work he used to keep the gurdwara open from four in the morning and performed the *Prakash* ceremony and recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib*. During the thirty days between every *sangrand*, the first day of the solar month, families organized broken readings of the whole Guru Granth Sahib (*Khulla path*) in the gurdwara. Since the 1980s the residents of the colony have also participated in the forty-day long

morning processions (*prabhatferi*) to Gurubagh and Nichibagh gurdwaras preceding the celebrations of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh's birthdays.

### EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

At the local level community members will encourage young people to take active interest in Sikh worship and provide teaching in Gurmukhi, music, and recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib. Prior to the introduction of the modern school systems in the nineteenth century, the Sikh gurdwara was the primary institution of religious teaching.<sup>179</sup> Even if modernization has transformed the traditional knowledge and shifted its circulation means to schools and colleges, the gurdwara remains a significant source for transmission of religious knowledge. Occasionally the gurdwaras at Varanasi are referred to as "schools of the Guru's teaching" (*gurmat vidhyale*). Religious learning is, with Lave's (1991) words, "a social phenomenon constituted in the experiences, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practices".<sup>180</sup> From an early age the children are socialized into the rhythm of the community and the perpetual sound of *gurbani*. Through regular and habitual contacts with the gurdwara they are exposed to a wide range of religious activities which make them familiar with worship acts and the words of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Another source of religious education and propaganda in modern times is the organization of study circles and educational student unions. Today there exists numerous local and regional Sikh organizations with various degrees of affiliation to educational religious centers in the Punjab. At Mogul Sarai near Varanasi, for instance, a group of thirty Sikhs have assembled in the association *Khalsa Seva Dal* with the main objective to instigate Sikhs to adopt a Khalsa identity. Representatives of the association frequently visited Varanasi for speeches in the gurdwaras and distributed propaganda leaflets during festivals. *Khalsa Seva Dal* is allied to the *Sikh Missionary College* in Ludhiana – an institution founded in the 1980s by Sikhs in Delhi and Punjab for the aim to train Sikh propagandists, educate the youths, and to encourage Sikhs and non-Sikhs to join the Khalsa fold.<sup>181</sup> The *Sikh Missionary College* arranges tuition by correspondence courses for those wishing to become missionaries, study circles, religious tests for children, and publishes literature, magazines and booklets, many of which are distributed free of charge to individuals and local associations such as the one at Mogul Sarai. In connection with the annual celebration of *Vaisakhi* the *Khalsa Seva Dal* and the congregation of *Grand Trunk Road Gurdwara* at Mogul Sarai organize the Khalsa ceremony (*Khande di pahul*) for Sikhs in Varanasi and surrounding districts.

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<sup>179</sup> Mann 2005: 11.

<sup>180</sup> Lave 1991: 64.

<sup>181</sup> See the web site at: [www.sikhmissionarycollege.org](http://www.sikhmissionarycollege.org).

Another popular non-profit organization committed to religious edification and propaganda amongst Sikh youth is *Guru Gobind Singh Study Circles* which was founded at Ludhiana in 1972. While keeping the administrative headquarter in Ludhiana the organization has branched out in eight different directorates and fifty-four zones in India and abroad.<sup>182</sup> The aim and objectives of the organization are primarily to foster Sikh youths in the Gurus' teaching and to inculcate Sikh ethics for a moral uplifting of the society. To achieve these goals the centre in Ludhiana organizes a wide range of educational activities and projects to reach out to Sikh children and teenagers, such as seminars on Sikh doctrines and worship, campaigns against social problems (e.g., drug addiction, female infanticide, caste system), games and contests in Sikh history and *gurbani* recitations, and so-called "Gurmat Training Camps" during which Sikh children from different areas gather in camp meetings to discuss Sikh worship, teaching, symbols, codes of conducts, and the like. Local Sikh communities are encouraged to establish units of study circles and will be provided Sikh literature free of charge from Ludhiana or the nearest directorate.

A Sikh family in Varanasi started up a local study circle attached to the state office in Lucknow for the purpose of propagating and promulgating normative Sikh doctrines and practices to Sikh youths. All registered members are required to fill in a form in which they state three habits they will try to adopt and three habits they will reject and then daily report their religious and moral activities that will be graded each month. The printed form is revealingly called "mirror" (*shisha*) as it is intended to reflect the spiritual and moral qualities and progress of the individual child. It is compulsory for members to wake up early in the morning to meditate and recite the daily Sikh prayers (*nitnem*) and participate in the congregational life. So-called "bonus" activities are recitations of additional hymns, engagement in literature on the Sikh religion, and charity work for the society. The students are also expected to report if they have lied, condemned or hurt anyone, wasted time, or conducted any of the "prohibited" deeds. The formalized method of keeping records of daily habits and behaviors aims to encourage moral conducts and person transformation.

In cooperation with the Gurdwara committee in Varanasi the *Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle* has since the 1990s organized the annual *Gurbani Recitation Test* and *History Education Examination* for Sikh and Sindhi children in Varanasi, usually in connection with festivals. Three days before the celebration of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in December 2000 around fifty children between the age of six and twenty volunteered for a competition which included a written test in knowledge of the Sikh tradition and an oral test in recitations of sacred hymns.<sup>183</sup> The tests were graded with

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<sup>182</sup> The organization is working in 17 states in India and 11 countries abroad. The *Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle* is nowadays published on the Internet at: [www.ggssc.net](http://www.ggssc.net).

<sup>183</sup> The historical examination on the first day was conducted in *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* at Gurubagh Gurdwara. For ninety minutes the children were to answer fifty questions related to the lives of the Sikh Gurus and significant events in the Sikh history. The questions had been distributed to participants one week in advance for practice. The following day all children were to individually display their ability to memorize and recite sacred hymns in an oral test before

a maximum score of hundred points, of which fifty points was the highest mark for the historical exam and the remaining fifty points for the recitation test. Students who wrote the answers of the written exam in Gurmukhi script would also get an extra ten points in bonus. To attract and encourage children to participate in the competitions community members donated cash prizes and trophies to the first three winners, as well as smaller gifts to all contestants. On the festival day the children were invited to demonstrate their knowledge and skill on stage in the gurdwara. These pedagogical activities successfully attempt to inspire the youth to take interest in the Sikh teaching, history, and the Guru Granth Sahib.

### 1.3. COUNTER-NARRATIVE AS COLLECTIVE MEMORY

For Sikhs in Varanasi it is not necessarily ancient mythologies about the great wonders of Shiva or the purifying powers of river Ganga that are held memorable and sanctify the city. As a minority group situated within the boundaries of a Hindu centre, the Sikhs have generated their own collective emic historiography, transmitted orally and published in printed texts. The written history sets the standard for what should be remembered of the past by the collective group of Sikhs. It is the recounting and commemoration of events in a shared past which are considered prior to personal experiences of individuals and work as a manifestation of a collective memory. As opposed to opinions that people are resistant to change or compliantly influenced by the social and cultural context which they are part of, the local history of the Sikhs is neither self-contained as a bounded object separable from the socio-cultural context in which it operates, nor dictated by this environment. On the contrary, it seems to have emerged in negotiations between local Sikhs in interactions with the wider context. As a collective representation of the past the local history manifests itself as a “counter-narrative” created in a dialogic relation to the dominating discourse or “master narrative” of Varanasi as the centre of Hindu pilgrimage and the stronghold of Brahmin orthodoxy and religious learning.<sup>184</sup> A counter-narrative is a

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senior community members, who acted as judges. The participants were divided into three age groups and expected to recite different compositions: children up to the age of six were tested in recitation of *Mulmantra*, the first hymns of the Guru Granth Sahib, and would be awarded extra points if they remembered additional hymns. Boys and girls between the age of six and ten were tested in the hymn *Chaupai Sahib*, while the teenagers up to the age of twenty recited the whole *Japji Sahib* and *Rahiras Sahib*. Each child would sit separately before an adult Sikh and read the compositions from memory. The instructors evaluated the children’s recitation proficiency on the criteria of correctness and devotion. For each mispronunciation or fault they deduced one point and only those who enunciated the text without faults and with a “feeling for *gurbani*” would be given the highest marks. All the children who scored more than forty points reached the finals and a second testing round.

<sup>184</sup> From a historian’s perspective, Megill (1995) distinguishes between “master narrative” and “grand narrative”, of which the former is a more limited story about particular segments of

micro-discursive accomplishment that runs counter and exists in relation to hegemonic ideologies and discourses. If the master narrative has a key function of providing people a way to record their lives and experiences within the framework of what is assumed to be a shared cultural discourse, then the counter-narrative enables strategies for subversion of master narratives and the creation of alternative or reversed perspectives when these experiences, particularly of those who constitute non-dominant or marginal groups in the society, do not comply with the hegemonic discourse. Even though the counter-narrative may be guided by various degrees of resistance and concerns with power, it still exists within the boundaries of the dominant narrative, which works as a blueprint for the counter.<sup>185</sup> As I intend to exemplify in the following, the scenery, characters and the main plot of the local Sikh history are set and framed by selected stereotypical images of Varanasi that provide the very foundation for the city's reputation in the Hindu world and beyond. Simultaneously the story manifests a position that counters the discursive framework by outlining events that eventually subvert Hindu values and domination. Instead of affirming the religious authority of Brahmins or the spiritual power of river Ganga, the story generates a narrative "twist" to make both categories subordinate and subject to the Sikh Gurus' teaching and power.

The rhetorical strategy to counter dominant beliefs and practices is in no way exceptional for the contemporary local historiography in Varanasi, but typical of the seventeenth century *Janam-sakhi* literature that aimed at proving the supremacy of Guru Nanak and the geographical spread of his teaching. In a web of anecdotes these stories lay out story lines and figures, representing diverse religious traditions and local cults in a stereotypical manner. Wherever Guru Nanak travels and whoever he encounters his spiritual and intellectual sovereignty is testified in words, actions, and sometimes only by a glance at him. According to McLeod (1980) the primary purpose of the historical *Janam-sakhis* was of a soteriological nature, in other words, how to reach salvation through the acceptance of Guru Nanak. The social function was to determine the identity of all who gathered around the Guru and maintain cohesion in the Sikh community by projecting images of the person who constituted the focus of a common loyalty among the Sikhs.<sup>186</sup> Similar concerns about spiritual liberation and religious identity are disclosed in the modern local historiography, however, adjusted to contemporary interests of Sikhs at a particular location.

The social composition of the present Sikh community in Varanasi is far from homogenous but consists of individuals from various social and cultural backgrounds. In the local narrative these social differences are deliberately concealed to favour an ideal of a uniform community that can trace its origin back to the time of

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history, lying in the background to be selectively deployed in the making of history and which makes smaller stories intelligible. "Grand narrative", on the other hand, claims to offer an account of the history as a whole and is justified by meta-narrating of objective scholars or religious people (1995: 152 – 153).

<sup>185</sup> Bamberg & Andrews 2004.

<sup>186</sup> McLeod 1980a: 244 – 247.

Guru Nanak's visit. Discursively the narrative attempts to create self-formation of a single community with unbroken links to the human Gurus in a pristine past. By grounding a coherent and singular subjectivity of the Sikhs in a defined spatial and temporal origin, as a fixed religious genus of an imagined local congregation, the narrative can also be used to lay claims on identity and legitimacy to be visible and acknowledged within a cultural and geographical space in the present.

### SIKH IMAGES OF VARANASI

The first step to investigate how a counter narrative is constructed in relation to a dominant discourse would be to address the question: what is being countered and in which way is the represented world of characters and event sequences drawn up? In the case at hand, images of the people and the city of Varanasi, exposed in numerous historical and modern texts, and uncritically recycled in traveler booklets, websites on the Internet, and even scholarly works, quite often confirm to an idealized image of the city as an ageless preserver of the Hindu tradition.<sup>187</sup> In the background of these representations lies a dominant discourse on Varanasi as a mythical and sacred centre of pilgrimage, a "treasury" of religious knowledge, where ancient Hindu religion and law is sustained by traditional Sanskrit studies, customs and rituals upheld by the upper strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy. The Sikhs, as a minority group associated with the land of Punjab, are typically marginalized to invisibility in texts of this category. Varanasi is the ancient holy city of the Hindus and not a religious centre of the Sikhs. When local Hindus operating within the dominant cultural discourse voice views on Sikhism they frequently present the religion as an integral part of the larger Hindu social and religious system: the Sikh Gurus belonged to the *kshatriyas* – the caste invested the duty to protect the Hindu nation and Brahmins already in the Veda books and which developed into a religion for the purpose of shielding Hindu beliefs from the invading and demonized Muslims. The noble patronage of Hindu dharm was disrupted by the creation of Khalsa when Guru Gobind Singh created a Sikh

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<sup>187</sup> For an historical example, consult Sherring 1996(1868). A modern example is Diane Eck's popular book *The City of Light* (1993), which makes a compulsory reading for any visitor in the city, just as it has become a guidebook for travelling guests with spiritual goals. The book describes the major Hindu places of worship and festivals in the city and is mainly based on the Hindu texts *Kashi Khanda* and *Kashi ki Itihas*, along with excursions and interviews with Brahmins. Singh & Rana's (2002) "spiritual and culture guide" to Varanasi is a more recent example of the gauzy line between scholarly work, guidebook and pilgrimage souvenir. Singh & Rana mention the Sikhs on one page in the book, even if the information provided is not fully correct (Singh & Rana 2002: 64). For instance, the authors claim there is a gurdwara at Jagat Ganj which refers to the disputed area between Sikhs and local Brahmins still pending in court (See above this chapter). Two other gurdwaras mentioned in the handbook, one at Shahzade ka math and another at Augharnath ka Takia, were unknown to local Sikhs, Nirmala, and Udasin saints when I inquired about these shrines in 2004 and 2005.



identity to maintain a separate tradition and thereby differentiated the Sikhs from the Hindus.<sup>188</sup>

Instead of reviewing a large number of accounts that in some way or another communicate and support the dominant master narrative of Varanasi, it is possible to approach the matter from a Sikh point of view and focus on the imagery that appears in religious writings of the broader Sikh tradition. The early poetry of the Gurus and the subsequent prose literature of the *janam-sakhi* tradition are historical sources that may serve as examples to illustrate how a city and its inhabitants have been imagined and represented by the Sikhs. While the Gurus utilized acknowledged images of Varanasi as allegories and metaphors to elucidate their teachings, the *janam-sakhi* narrators embroidered stories about characters and events in Varanasi for the purpose of glorifying the mission of Guru Nanak. The imaginations of Varanasi materializing in the *janam-sakhi* literature operate on a level of generality: selected fabrics of the master narratives on Varanasi are represented in plot constructions and dialogues to mould a typicality of people in Varanasi which eventually only the Sikh Gurus alone have power to reshape.

Compositions in the Guru Granth Sahib elucidates that the Sikh Gurus were well acquainted with the reputation Varanasi enjoyed in the Hindu world as the foremost center of pilgrimage and religious learning. From their poetry emerge images of a city crowded with idols, sacred shrines and temples; Sanskrit speaking and upper-caste learned scholars – the *pandits* – are engaged in religious discourses on the Vedas and ritual conducts. In the center flows river Ganga which attracts pilgrims for purifying baths.<sup>189</sup> The Gurus' descriptions portray Varanasi as the stronghold of Hindu orthodoxy where people assemble for ritual services and the upper-caste society protects the scriptural riches of religious wisdom. Although the Gurus condemned the hegemony of Brahmins as a social phenomena and reliance on ritualism without inner commitment, the linguistic images of Varanasi are utilized as metaphors to point towards inner knowledge and devotion of the Guru-oriented person, that is, move the readers to new semantic horizons of their own teachings.<sup>190</sup>

A more provocative approach is expressed in the verses of the Muslim weaver Kabir included in the Sikh scripture. Kabir descended from Varanasi and his religious poetry diligently conjures up humorous and unflattering pictures of the Brahmins and pandits with whom he coexisted. In one famous hymn in the Guru Granth Sahib, Kabir excoriates the pandits preparing food with deep concerns about ritual purity

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<sup>188</sup> Throughout my fieldwork the notion of Sikhism as a main protector of Hindu dharma up to the creation of *Khalsa* appeared in multiple conversations with local Hindus of various social backgrounds as well as with individual Sikhs.

<sup>189</sup> See e.g. GGS: 358, GGS: 1100, GGS: 491, GGS: 986.

<sup>190</sup> In one hymn, for example, Guru Amardas states that the guru-oriented devotee preserves the whole city of Benares, all pilgrimage shrines and Holy Scriptures, within the mind. GGS: 491. Similar references to Varanasi as a holy place and pilgrimage center of Hindus are found in the writings of Bhai Gurdas (1551 – 1636) from the seventeenth century. See *Var* 24:4, 33:2, 38:9, 39:10 in Jodh Singh 1998 (Vol. 2): 66, 270, 395, 416.

but without any scruples to depend on food offerings paid for by other castes. For Kabir the pandits dressed in loincloths and adorned with rosaries and sacred threads (*tilak*) are “the thugs of Benares” (*Banaras ke thag*) who always will be wandering in self-conceit.<sup>191</sup>

SOURCES ON GURU NANAK’S VISIT TO VARANASI	
JANAM-SAKHI	THEME
<i>Valaitvali Janam-sakhi</i> 1600	Discourse with pandit Chattur Das.
<i>Miharbani Janam-sakhi</i> 1600	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Nanak teaches Ram-followers on the merits of studying religious books.</li> <li>2. Nanak is invited to orthodox pandits for food.</li> <li>3. Nanak teaches noble men in eastern Banaras on how to become righteous.</li> <li>4. Nanak lectures Banarsi people on knowledge and the Vedas.</li> <li>5. Nanak discusses with Vaishnava students at a pilgrimage place.</li> <li>6. Nanak encounters a group of pandits at the riverbank of Ganga.</li> </ol>
<i>Bala Janam-sakhi</i> 1800	Discourse with pandit Chattur Das.

Figure 6.

The hagiographical *janam-sakhi* literature recorded from the seventeenth century and onwards came to create mythologized prose stories about the life and deeds of Guru Nanak to impart narrative settings and delineate the origin of the sacred speech. The narrators apparently draw much of the textual fabrics from the writings of the Sikh Gurus, pre-existing oral traditions, and motifs and themes in their own social and cultural context.<sup>192</sup> Guru Nanak’s encounter with learned scholars and Vaishnava followers in Varanasi on his travels eastwards became a predominant theme in this literary genre. At least three of the recorded *janam-sakhi* versions of different ages mention Guru Nanak’s visit in the city (See Figure 6) and in all probability additional references are to be found in other oral and written versions from the nineteenth and twentieth century.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>191</sup> GGS: 476.

<sup>192</sup> McLeod 1980a.

<sup>193</sup> The *Bala Janam-sakhi* is recorded in Henry Court’s *History of the Sikhs* from 1888, which is an English translation of Sardha Ram’s work *Sikhan de Raj di Vithia* written in the 1860s. According to McLeod the work includes twenty stories from a version of *Bala Janam-sakhi* of the late nine-

The *Valaitvali Janam-sakhi* carries the eldest hagiographical reference dated to the early seventeenth century.<sup>194</sup> The narrated event starts out from a rhetoric differentiation of the outer appearance of Guru Nanak and a Hindu scholar named Chatur Das to make the external dissimilarities and the problem of identification a cause of interaction between the two. *Valaitvali Janam-sakhi* locates Nanak's visit in Varanasi to his first travel and the scene is laid at the bank of river Ganga. In the opening section of this anecdote the *janam-sakhi* narrator provides a detailed description of Nanak's dress: he wears white clothes, a pair of shoes, a long scarf, a rosary and the Kalandri cap characteristic of Muslim hermits. Like Hindus he has a mark (*tikka*) in saffron colour on his forehead.<sup>195</sup> The Guru's clothes, combining Hindu and Muslim elements, makes Chatur Das utterly confused. Since he cannot identify the sectarian belonging he opens a conversation by commenting on what Nanak is not wearing, that is, he has no *shalagram*,<sup>196</sup> wears no beads of the sacred Basil plant (*tulsi*) or the white-clayed (*gopi-chandan*) mark typical of Vaishnava followers. In response Nanak requests Mardana to tune his rebeck and describes the typical symbols and rituals of the scholars in the Vaishnava tradition: they worship the *shalagram* stone and wear rosaries of the basil plant.<sup>197</sup> Impressed by these words Chatur Das confirms that Nanak is a saint (*bhagat*) of God and requests him to bless Varanasi with his presence. When Guru Nanak enquires what type of virtues he can obtain from the city, Chatur Das tells it is a centre of religious studies where learned scholars pursue inner knowledge (*siddh*) by studying Smriti texts to teach disciples in the world – an occupation the pandit himself is dedicated to, however not fully convinced of the merits he will gain from it. In response to these doubts Nanak utters a verse in which he teaches the pandit to listen to the message of the universal Creator and write the name of God instead of engaging in worldly debates.<sup>198</sup> Rather than providing a circumstantial account of disparate identities of the inhabitants in Varanasi, the narrative conveys an idealized depiction of the religious elite personified in a Hindu scholar of the Vaishnava tradition, who comes to stand as an icon of the whole population. Both the utterances of the scholar and Guru Nanak corroborate which kind of actions and appearances are typical of this representation: studies and teachings of

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teenth century (McLeod 1980a: 281 – 282). The eighteenth century *Nanak Prakash* by Santokh Singh similarly mentions that Guru Nanak visited Varanasi and impressed the learned scholars of Kashi at the river bank of Ganga.

<sup>194</sup> In English works the *Valaitvali Janam-sakhi* is also referred to as the *Colebrooke* manuscript which was re-discovered and first published in translation in 1877 by Ernest Trumpp. In 1926 Bhai Vir Singh published an edition that combined narratives from the *Colebrooke* manuscript with the *Hafizabad* version, a similar manuscript acquired by Gurmukh Singh at Oriental College in Lahore in 1884. This edition Bhai Vir Singh titled *Puratan Janam-sakhi*, or "The Older Janam-sakhi" to indicate the ascribed historical value of the two manuscripts (McLeod 1980a, Kirpal Singh 1990).

<sup>195</sup> Kirpal Singh 1990: 15.

<sup>196</sup> *Shalagram* is a black stone or fossil believed to be permeated with substances of Vishnu.

<sup>197</sup> Kirpal Singh 1990: 16. The hymn uttered is recorded in Guru Granth Sahib on page 1181.

<sup>198</sup> GGS: 929.

the Hindu scriptures and ritual worship to sacred stones of Vishnu are the means by which Hindus of Varanasi articulate their religious identity.

The *Miharban Janam-sakhi*, claimed to be of the early seventeenth century origin, provides the most elaborate account on Guru Nanak's deeds in Varanasi.<sup>199</sup> In two episodes composed totally of six anecdotes, Nanak gives lectures on righteous actions, spiritual gains, and the Vedas to learned scholars, Brahmins, Vaishnava followers, and other religious peoples, whose speeches and actions are more exhaustively described even if all characters are kept nameless throughout the story. Amusingly *Miharban Janam-sakhi* pulls out all the stops of idiomatic expressions and greetings to depict a linguistic typicality of traditional Hindus in the region. Guru Nanak, who always suits himself to new cultural settings, takes up local colloquial, saluting people with "Ram, Ram" and excessively addresses them with conventional suffix of honor. Unlike the *Vailaitvali Janam-sakhi* the stories in this hagiography do not develop from noticeable differences between Nanak and the local people. Reversibly, one anecdote about cooking pandits specifically brings out their shared affiliation to the Vaishnava religion which induces the most orthodox scholars to invite the Guru for sanctified food. Alluding to traditional food taboos of the upper-caste Hindu society the Guru accepts the invitation on the condition that the pandits will prepare only pure food. The orthodox Hindus accordingly set up a kitchen consistent with their strict purity regulations, to find that Guru Nanak in the end refuses to eat because they have not imbued the food with real purity of devotion to God. The final point of this anecdote is explicated by quoting a hymn in which Nanak provocatively employs the simile of a woman's menstruation – a source of great ritual pollution in the traditional Hindu culture – to illustrate how falsehood dwells in the mouth of those who call themselves pure merely by external purification. Only those who have the divine abiding in their minds can be considered the truly pure (*sucha*).<sup>200</sup>

The other anecdotes in *Miharban Janam-Sakhi* similarly present vivid sceneries of the imagined cultural ethos in Varanasi. In one story, for instance, Guru Nanak takes a seat nearby a pilgrimage site (*tirath*) where a large number of the religious characters have assembled: pandits to teach from religious books, Vaishnava followers worshipping the *shalagram*, and ascetics for austerity practices and meditation. The Guru realizes that the amount of cheaters (*thag*) in Varanasi is boundless when all advise him to study, worship and meditate for the lucrative business of religion at the pilgrimage center. After Guru Nanak has explained that all desires are satisfied in the person whose mind is pierced with the words of God the pandits bow at his feet and become disciples.<sup>201</sup>

These brief examples of historical Sikh writings may illustrate how certain stereotyped aspects of the city and people of Varanasi constitute the motif and scheme of stories that aim to praise the Guru's teaching and mission. The courses of

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<sup>199</sup> Kirpal Singh 1990: 101.

<sup>200</sup> GGS: 472.

<sup>201</sup> GGS: 634.

events are plotted according to a meta-narrative frame that portrays the city as the pilgrimage seat with river Ganga flowing in the center, the vessel of ancient Hindu wisdom, and a stronghold of the Brahminism that is protected and preserved by the generalized others – the Hindu pandits, pilgrims, and the Brahmins. Guru Nanak successfully counters and reshapes these characters to communicate a new spiritual message (See Figure 7).

Figure 7.

#### SIKH IMAGES OF VARANASI

<i>City</i>	<i>Agents</i>	<i>Action</i>
Center of Hinduism	Vaishnava followers	Worship the <i>shalagram</i>
Vessel of ancient knowledge	Book-learned Pandits	Study and teach the Vedas Engage in religious debates
Stronghold of upper-caste Hindus	Hindu Brahmins	Engage in ritual conducts Uphold purity and caste rules
Hindu pilgrimage center with river Ganga	Hindu Pilgrims	Ritual baths in river Ganga for purification

The modern emic historiography of the Sikhs in Varanasi has developed these themes further to construct stories that build upon the dominant Hindu discourse but open up territory for new agency of the Sikh Gurus' power and presence in the city. For people who do not submit to the master narrative the possible strategy is to create a counter by way of appealing to other frames which convey particular descriptions and evaluations opposing to the master narrative but still presents experiences along similar lines. As we shall see, the local Sikh history transforms the Hindu city to a center for learning and pilgrimage of the Sikhs.

#### A LOCAL NARRATIVE

The written local history on the Sikhs and the gurdwaras in Varanasi can be termed "emic history" as it is an account which provides descriptions in accord with epistemological principles regarded meaningful and appropriate by members of the community.<sup>202</sup> Emic history works from an "inside" perspective and depends on shared values within the group collecting history. Its narrative terrain often serves to explain who the people are, where they come from, and what they hope to be in the future. The writing and retelling of one's own history can thus be usable for the course of personal and communal identity and meanings in the present. As Olsson writes:

<sup>202</sup> Lett 1990: 31 – 32.

By writing or telling one's own history an imagined community of an idealized past is constructed, and even conjured up, into which the needs and wishes of the present are projected. Like genealogies and origin myths, the telling of history provides meaning, experience of identity, and visibility.<sup>203</sup>

The construction of emic historiography has different goals and objects in view than scholarly writings on the past. As Hammer (2001) suggests, unlike scholarly or "etic" approaches to history emic historiography is characterized by reductionism, evidentialism, and homogenization, in other words, complex contexts and variations are reduced to a few significant events that will be standardized and legitimized by authoritative knowledge in the religious tradition.<sup>204</sup>

As a collective representation of a shared past, the local Sikh history is principally a story about events and characters during the Guru-period. Beside the main stories about the two gurdwaras in the city centre of Varanasi – Gurubagh and Nichi-bagh – the narrative briefly renders the separate histories related to the following institutions and traditions: *Gurdwara Shri Chetan Math* at Visheshwar Ganj under control of Nirmala saints; the resident of Kabir in neighborhood of Kabir Chaura;<sup>205</sup> *Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir*, which marks out the birthplace of Ravidas in the village Govardhanpur; a smaller Sikh shrine named *Sangat Ghat* in the town of Chota Mirzapur ten kilometers outside Varanasi; and *Gurdwara Bhuili Sahib* in the village Bhuili thirty kilometers from the city.<sup>206</sup> The criteria of inclusion of these shrines and communities emanate from their claimed historical relationship to the human Sikh Gurus, venerated Sikh disciples, and the Guru Granth Sahib. The Nirmala institution of *Shri Chetan Math*, for instance, is an independent organization with no administrative bonds to the Sikh community today, but it has been included on account of its alleged presence of disciples – Bhai Gurdas and the first five Nirmala Sikhs – to the human

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<sup>203</sup> Olsson 1998: 200.

<sup>204</sup> Hammer 2001: 155 - 185.

<sup>205</sup> It is noteworthy that the local story does not mention the legendary meeting with Kabir and Guru Nanak at Varanasi, which has given rise to speculations that Kabir was the teacher of Nanak. This meeting is mentioned in the *Miharban Janam-sakhi* and the *Hindaliya Janam-Sakhi*. The latter contains an episode in which Guru Nanak is presented as a disciple of Kabir (Cole 1982a: 8 – 12). According to the nineteenth century book *Panth Prakash* of Giani Gian Singh, Guru Nanak met and spent time with Kabir in a village called Pula between Varanasi and Patna (Parkash 1981: n. 28).

<sup>206</sup> The gurdwara *Sangat Ghat* at Chota Mirzapur is built in memory of Guru Tegh Bahadur's visit in the village on his way to Varanasi in 1666. According the local lore the Guru stayed there for 13 days and meditated (*tapashya*) in a small chamber beside the present gurdwara hall. When I visited the gurdwara in 2004 the son of the local *granthi* told me they always keep a light burning inside the chamber and a snake protects the space. Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom is celebrated with unbroken readings (*Akhand path*) and communal kitchens (*langar*). The gurdwara is not under management of VGPC but receives donations to celebrate festivals.

Gurus. Other Nirmala establishments which do not have similar stories to report have consequently been excluded from the narrative. In the case of Kabir and Ravidas, short descriptions of the places related to the two saint-poets have been integrated in the local history based on the inclusion of their religious poetry in the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>207</sup> The local history employs the narrative device of privileging certain stories while underplaying others in order to create a coherent and memorable text. Only buildings and characters that can demonstrate historical links to the Sikh Gurus or the Guru Granth Sahib are reported, as well as shrines which the present gurdwara committee administers. In this way the narrative patterns a spatial organization of historical edifices that differentiate particular centers of sacrality and authority.

The emic history is typically agent-centered with an internal structure that involves three basic components of *agent* (the doer of action), *action* (what took place), and *patient* (the persons or things that were affected by the action).<sup>208</sup> The human Sikh Gurus are the chief agents staged at the centre of the stories with supernatural power to control actions and to whom all historical events are related and tied together. The more the individual Guru acts within the story the more well-defined is his identity and agentive capacity. The Gurus respond to the contexts which they encounter but they act and create a causal history on divinely inspired and deterministic premises. Only they are the real doers of history which no other comes close to competing with

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<sup>207</sup> The construction of the Ravidas temple, situated in the area between Benares Hindu University and river Ganga, exemplifies how lower caste groups revived the Ravidas tradition in the twentieth century by blending social activism and religion. The initiator of the temple construction in Varanasi was Sarwan Das, a Punjabi saint of the *chamar* caste from Ballan, a village seven miles north of Jalandhar. In the 1960s Sarwan Das went to Varanasi to search for the right birth place and found a *nim* tree in Govardhanpur which was seen as token of the authentic birthplace. He purchased the land and constituted a charitable trust with the head office at Ballan. With financial support from Adi Dharmis and Ravidas followers abroad, especially from England, the *Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir* was completed in 1972 (Juergensmeyer 1982: 84 – 85, 260 – 261; Jassi & Suman 2000: 5.). Four years later the then president of India, K.R. Narayanan, inaugurated the *Shri Guru Ravidas Gate*, a huge gate at Lanka Crossing which marks the road turning towards the temple. In the southern area of Varanasi, the government has recently laid out *Ravidas Park*, a recreation area close by the river Ganga. The temple, the gate, and the park have given the Ravidas community a representation in the city and strengthened their identity, caste solidarity and demand for social justice. This became manifest during the 634<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Ravidas in February 2001 when thousands of Ravidas pilgrims from Punjab, England, Canada and the USA poured into the city of Varanasi. They had booked two airplanes only for the pilgrims, and for many of them it was their first visit to India. Wearing western clothes, carrying digital cameras and speaking fluent English they presented a different face of the stereotyped *chamar* in the streets of Varanasi. The Sikh community arranged local transportation for about 2000 pilgrims and gave board and lodging to about 250 of them. Scriptures were also leant for the performance of seven unbroken readings of Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path*).

<sup>208</sup> The concept of “agent-centric” and “agent-centricity” is derived from Urban’s analysis of myths, in which he discusses the components of action, agent and patient in the internal structure of narratives (Urban 1981: 324).

and the history is therefore segmented into episodes to display the Gurus' actions. The people who encounters with the Guru (*patients*) are presented only in relation to him and transform as they interact with the Guru.

Focusing only on the two main stories which relate the visits of Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur at Varanasi, the emic history has apparently drawn much of the semantic content and structure from local legends transmitted orally, combined with fabrics from the varying oral and textual *janam-sakhi* traditions of the broader Sikh community. Similar to many *janam-sakhis* narratives the local history is presented in the form of anecdotes or short stories of events that claim to recount true incidents of the past. In an analysis of secular stories Baumann (1988) instructs that anecdotes tend to focus on a single episode – a segment of narrated events – and are characterized by a dialogic construction that strives towards a final climactic point, often of a moral tenor. Anecdotes are end-oriented stories that usually incorporate instances of quoted speech or reported utterances at the end to underline the message of a final punch line.<sup>209</sup> Correspondingly the narrative plot configuration of the emic history is composed of two episodes on Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur, which consist of anecdotes about selected events that are made relevant and sequenced in a cohesive way to add up to the final punch line. Each episode is framed by an opening orienting section, which serves to set the spatial and temporal framework, and ends with a concluding coda to bridge the narrated past events with the contemporary Sikh community and buildings.<sup>210</sup> The orienting section informs about the reasons why the Gurus visited the eastern regions – Guru Nanak appeared in the degenerated time of *kaliyug* and set out on travels to give salvation and Tegh Bahadur traveled out of Punjab at the request of his disciples – and then locates the subsequent narrated events in time and space by stating the years and the ways by which the Gurus arrived at Varanasi. The ending coda identifies the Gurus' sites in the local geography of Varanasi and declares how they have been protected by contemporary devout Sikhs. The concluding addendum of the story on Guru Tegh Bahadur's visit in Nichi-bagh provides information on preserved relics and letters of the Guru, which the gurdwara displays for veneration. Through this meta-narratively framing the written history may serve as a handbook for pilgrims, instructing them on which historical sacred sites to attend and the material objects to honor on their visit in Varanasi.

Like the typical style of the *janam-sakhi* literature, the local narrative interpolates several shorter and longer quotations from Guru Granth Sahib held to be uttered or sung by Guru Nanak as a divine revelation transmitted through his voice. Anecdotes on Guru Nanak do not only serve to demonstrate the superiority of the Guru's identity and deeds, but embroider the narrative settings of time, place and causality under which hymns are claimed to be produced. In the local narrative, conversations and acts eventually culminate in a final punch line that imparts the point

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<sup>209</sup> Bauman 1988: 55. See also McLeod's (1980a) discussion on form and function of the *janam-sakhis*.

<sup>210</sup> See Bauman 1988: 91.



of the story. This is accomplished by inserting quoted speech of Guru Nanak in the form of a final lecture addressed to the scholars of Varanasi.

Having divine words mediated at a locality specified by the Guru signifies yet another level of meaning to local Sikhs; it sanctifies a place and makes the first disciples preservers of the Guru's sacred speech. In the episode on Guru Tegh Bahadur's travel the quotation of a hymn composed by Guru Arjan is presented as the devotional link between the Guru and his disciples: when Guru Tegh Bahadur visits Allahabad, Kalyan Das in Varanasi affectionately recites a hymn with desires to meet the Guru. Through his extrasensory perception Guru Tegh Bahadur realizes that he must travel eastwards to meet the anxious soul waiting for him. In both these episodes quotation of *gurbani* is the key to establishing relationships between the human Gurus and their disciples at Varanasi.

### THREE PANDITS, A DOG, AND RIVER GANGA

The narrative on Guru Nanak's deeds consists of two separate anecdotes that have been blended to form a composite episode structured around discourses with three learned scholars or pandits. The Guru is portrayed as intellectually superior to the religious elite in Varanasi and he has not arrived for religious debates but to convey a teaching. Throughout the story he is addressed as "Guru ji", an enlightened teacher who is in the process of mediating divine messages revealed to him, and each debate will consequently turn into a lecture that serves to prove the spiritual supremacy of his teaching and presence. Even the most arrogant pandit of Varanasi will be internally struck by the spiritual glamour of Guru Nanak's face and is drawn towards him. Moreover, Nanak is gifted with mystical powers attesting a status likened to the divine itself: he reads inner thoughts of people, foresees events to come, and works a miracle. The mystical experience in the interaction with the Guru is physical and sensory. A mere glimpse of his exalted personage purifies souls and by touching his feet people are liberated. After witnessing these extraordinary actions the scholarly elite of Varanasi will confirm that Nanak "is the re-incarnation of God in *kaliyug*" and become his disciples.<sup>211</sup>

The first anecdote relates the famous pandit Gopal Shastri, who is the owner of the garden in which Guru Nanak takes a seat. The pandit is magnetically drawn to the Guru by the sound of the divine name emanating from Mardana's rebeck. Gopal Shastri is not challenging Guru Nanak to debate but simply inquires about his worship. After listening to the singing and teaching of Guru Nanak the soul of Gopal Shastri is purified; he becomes a follower and eventually gives away his garden to the Guru. The outline of the first part of this anecdote resembles the discourse between Guru Nanak and pandit Chattur Das in the seventeenth century *Valaitoli Janam-sakhi* referred to above. Hypothetically the modern narrative could have drawn parts of the material from this source or other oral and textual versions, however, modified the story to be an account of Gopal Shastri instead of Chattur Das. The modern narrative

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<sup>211</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kush Itihasik Yadan*, p. 6.

quotes the same scriptural hymn in the context of a similar episode, but makes Gopal Shastri the patient-actor who is more inquisitive about the particular worship of Guru Nanak rather than being confused about his religious identity. Guru Nanak gives a fairly long and critical lecture on the futile gains of worshiping stones and plants instead of conducting righteous deeds with sincere intentions.<sup>212</sup> The nature of the Gopal Shastri in the modern narrative is comparable to the character portrayed in the seventeenth century source: the pandit does not provoke Nanak in debates nor bear signs of pride, but seems anxious to know about the Guru and his teaching. He personifies a scholar questing for spiritual truth and hence unhesitatingly becomes a disciple after listening to the Guru's rewarding explanations. This disposition stands in contrast to another conceited pandit who requires more than conversations to be convinced.

The second and longer anecdote of emic history continues to narrate Guru Nanak's encounter with learned scholars in the garden. Pandit Chatur Das appears in this section, but his character is attributed more arrogant features than the figure with the same name in the *janam-sakhi* literature. He is described as the most learned and reputed pandit of Varanasi, who has defeated most scholars in religious debates, but is overconfident and proud because of his vast knowledge. Upon hearing about Guru Nanak's wisdom, celebrated in the city, Chatur Das becomes envious and decides to challenge the Guru to a debate to recover his own reputation. The main plot of this anecdote centers upon what McLeod (1980) calls "wonder story", that is, a story whose distinctive feature is "signification of divine status by means of miraculous deeds and supernatural phenomena."<sup>213</sup> Instead of taking up the gauntlet of Chatur Das, Guru Nanak orders the scholar to pose all his questions to a dog sitting nearby and simultaneously works a miracle: by a mere look Guru Nanak transforms the dog into a well-dressed pandit named Ganga Ram,<sup>214</sup> who will tell Chatur Das about his curse of being reborn as a animal due to arrogant behaviour in his previous life as a scholar.<sup>215</sup> Apparently the degree of Chatur Das' vices demands a supernatural deed to demonstrate the consequences of egotistical actions, rather than just giving answers in plain words. The story lets the pandit via a dog-birth be the spokesman of three testimonies which the miracle points towards: first, even the person regarded most knowledgeable will not spiritually progress but face a bad rebirth if his mind/heart is filled with selfishness and jealousy. Ganga Ram, cursed by a saint because he was barking like a dog in his previous life, personifies an example of the karmic result. Secondly, in the Dark Age (*kaliyug*) people will only gain salvation through the grace of Guru Nanak. Before entering the dog-birth Ganga

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<sup>212</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihasik Yadan*, p. 3.

<sup>213</sup> McLeod 1980a: 90

<sup>214</sup> According to Kirpal Singh the name and story of Ganga Ram's meeting with Guru Nanak is a local legend of Varanasi (Kirpal Singh 1990: 51).

<sup>215</sup> A rebirth as a dog is generally considered to be the result of sins and bad *karma* from previous life. One interlocutor communicated a slightly different interpretation of the miracle: Guru Nanak transformed the dog to a scholar by sprinkling water-nectar (*amrit*) on it.

Ram pursued this knowledge from the saint who cursed him and had ever since been waiting for the arrival of Guru Nanak. The third and final conclusion is a confirming statement that Nanak is indeed a reincarnation of God in the Dark Age and the universal liberator.

Although the longer anecdote appears to be a local legend, resembling themes may occur in some versions of the more mythologically embroidered *janam-sakhi* stories or related narratives of later date. Like the stylistic feature of the *janam-sakhi* genres, a quotation of a hymn from Guru Granth Sahib is interpolated in the narrative discourse to corroborate the divine status and power of the Guru. At the very end, and as the final punch line of the anecdote, Guru Nanak speaks up to confirm that Chattur Das has indeed deceived innocent people in futile ritual conducts. When the deluded pandit finally asks Nanak about true deeds, Nanak replies by reciting the first verse of *Shalok Sanskriti*,<sup>216</sup> a hymn of four verses, which for local Sikhs is intimately associated with Varanasi as the centre of Sanskrit studies:

You read books, say vesper prayers, argue, worship stones and sit in trance like a crane. With you mouth you utter falsehood like the excellent ornaments and recite the tripod gaotri three times a day. Round your neck is the rosary, on your forehead the sacred mark and on your head a towel and you have two loin-cloths. If you know the nature of the Lord, then you will find that all these beliefs and rites are vain. Says Nanak, in good faith, meditate thou on the Lord. Without the True Guru, man finds not the way.<sup>217</sup>

In a typical style, *Shalok Sanskriti* is modeled as an exhortatory lecture addressed to Brahmins, whom the Guru identifies by their external appearances and then criticizes for superstitious beliefs and arrogant attitudes. In the last part of the hymn the Guru will praise the almighty creator and reprimand that only devotion and faith in the divine word is the means towards salvation. After listening to these words Chattur Das becomes a disciple to Guru Nanak. Ganga Ram is liberated from the cycle of rebirth by touching the Guru's feet.

To portray Guru Nanak as Sanskrit-speaking is certainly a discursive strategy to underscore his intellectual superiority and appeal to the scholarly elite in the sixteenth century Varanasi. The Guru adapts himself to the cultural environment he encounters. To contemporary Sikhs the *Shalok Sanskriti* bears testimony to a divine revelation situated in the local geography, more particularly at Gurubagh Gurdwara. If the recorded emic history provides the genesis of this particular hymn of Guru Nanak, then local Sikhs will describe what happened to the hymn thereafter. A Sikh family who claim to be descendants of Ganga Ram told me that the grandsons of the

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<sup>216</sup> Except for the local narrative I have not found any mention of this particular hymn in narrative discourses of the *janam-sakhi* literature.

<sup>217</sup> GGS: 1353

two scholars Ganga Ram and Chattur Das together visited the fifth Guru Arjan at Amritsar during the compilation process of the Sikh scripture in the beginning of seventeenth century. The grandsons presented the Guru with *Shalok Sanskriti* and supposedly said: “Guru Nanak Dev ji came to Varanasi and gave us teaching in Sanskrit. We have recorded a hymn (*bani*) that you may include in the scripture to immortalize it.” According to this legend the offspring of the two scholars preserved *Shalok Sanskriti* for almost a hundred years before they handed it over to the Guru for incorporation in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The episode about Guru Tegh Bahadur’s visit in Varanasi is considerably shorter and seems to be a local legend which presupposes the existence of a Sikh community since the time of Guru Nanak. As claimed, Guru Tegh Bahadur reached the city in 1666 and stayed for seven months and thirteen days at the house of his disciple Kalyan Das, located in the Nichibagh Gurdwara in Chowk. The Guru was granted a seat in an underground chamber to pursue his daily routine of meditation in the early nectar hours. Similar to the anecdote on Nanak, the episode centers upon a miracle worked by the Guru to counteract essential beliefs in the Hindu society: on the day of eclipse crowds of pilgrims flocked to Varanasi for a holy dip in the sacred river Ganga. Kalyan Das desired to accompany Guru Tegh Bahadur for a bath as the Hindu custom prescribed. In response, the Guru told his disciple to induce mother Ganga to extend her waters to his residence. The rational Kalyan Das was perplexed by this answer since his house was located one kilometer from the riverbed on the highest level in the city. Nevertheless he dug up a heavy slab in the courtyard on order of the Guru. When the slab was removed, holy water of river Ganga sprang forth to serve Guru Tegh Bahadur and his disciples. After having subserviently touched the feet of the Guru, the river gushed back on his request.<sup>218</sup> The Guru did not go to mother Ganga, but instead the holy river submitted to the Guru’s command and came to him. For this reason local Sikhs believe that the river Ganga is still flowing under the building of Nichibagh. The water collected from a well inside the gurdwara is treated as immortal Ganga nectar (*amrit*) from the Guru’s power.

#### CREATING A COUNTER

The outline and story construction of the emic history is characterized by differentiation and essentialism. The personification of Guru Nanak and his teaching is defined in relation to the significant Hindu “other” represented by the three disoriented and rival scholars with whom he meets. The profile of the Hindu otherness is exclusively restricted to particular features – upper-caste and Sanskrit-speaking Brahmin scholars – that are kept in line with the dominant discourse of Varanasi, while other elements and activities in the social reality are suppressed. The Hindu elite of learned scholars are invested essential characteristics which stand as discursive icons of the broader cultural life of people in Varanasi.

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<sup>218</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihasik Yadan*, pp. 9 – 12.

The three pandits are also attributed different dispositions which they bring with them to the narrated event and make them speak to humans in general: Gopal Shastri is certainly ignorant about spiritual truths but his humble character makes him receptive to Guru Nanak's teaching and promptly he becomes a disciple. After having mastered saints and intellectuals in religious debates Chattur Das, on the other hand, is blind by self-complacency to such an extent that Guru Nanak even refuses to speak with him. It takes a miraculous deed to persuade him of the spiritual message. The third scholar, Ganga Ram, personifies the destiny of such arrogant behavior by being reborn in the guise of a dog. He has realized the futility of conceit. Altogether the personalities and deeds of the three pandits epitomize states and vices in all humans outside the story. The agentive Guru evaluates and criticizes the scholars for having entangled themselves and innocent people in empty worship. They bark like dogs but only nurture their own ego with arrogance. The particular evaluation is chosen to tell how the pandits should be understood within the plot line and simultaneously it conveys a more general moral message about the human destiny without the guidance of the Guru. At the end, however, the most arrogant scholars will undergo a metamorphosis through the agency of the Guru's acts, speech and presence. Instead of confirming the authority of Brahmin scholars the story creates a reflexive turn to subvert the religious elite to humble disciples of the Sikh Guru. The pandits become counter-characters who are complicit with the master narrative of Varanasi but challenge the paradigm by subjecting themselves to the Guru and the Guru's teaching. They are the first Sikhs who constitute a holy congregation in the city.

On one level the local history narratively deconstructs and counters images and beliefs of the local Hindu context to open up territory for a new agency of the Guru with power to transform people and places (See Figure 8). The story creates an alternative story which still positions the collective group of Sikhs within the framework of the dominant discourse. As Varanasi was the Hindu centre for Brahmin scholars and pilgrims, Guru Nanak successfully converted the religious elite to the Sikh teaching and made his garden a site of pilgrimage. When Hindu pilgrims flocked to Varanasi for a purifying bath in river Ganga, Guru Tegh Bahadur made the goddess river – the focal object of worship and pilgrimage – an obedient servant at his feet and her waters are ever present in Nichibagh Gurdwara on his command. Knowing that Varanasi was reputed for ancient wisdoms, Guru Gobind Singh made it a stronghold of Sanskrit studies and religious learning for Sikhs by sending his five Nirmala scholars for studies.

The intertextuality of the emic history makes it intimately related to the wider social and cultural context in which the history has been produced. For a minority Sikh community, situated in a predominantly Hindu culture far away from the land of the Gurus, the stories provide meanings to sacred places and enables them a history in their own right. The history has been put down in writing by a leading group of Sikh migrants from Punjab and Pakistan who settled in Varanasi after the partition in 1947 and did not have any cultural roots in the city. To collect and record a history

with shared signs of the broader Sikh tradition becomes one strategy to escape the lack of history. Structured as a counter-narrative the emic history becomes a meta-narrative device to index features of ongoing interactions between the Sikh minority group and the Hindu majority society and to lay claims on identity and visibility within the new socio-cultural context.

Figure 8.

#### SIKH COUNTER-IMAGES OF VARANASI

<i>Action</i>	<i>People</i>	<i>City</i>
Guru Nanak defeats Hindu scholars in debate and works a miracle in a garden	The Hindu Pandits become disciples of the Guru	Preserver of the Guru's teaching  Sikh pilgrimage centre with the Guru's garden
Guru Tegh Bahadur conjures up river Ganga to touch his feet	Sikhs take bath/drink nectar-water of Ganga	Sikh pilgrimage centre with a holy well in Nichibagh
Guru Gobind Singh sends five disciples to Varanasi	The five Sikh scholars establish the Nirmala order	Stronghold of religious knowledge and Sanskrit studies of the Sikhs.

On another level the story conveys spiritual and moral messages for all. Stories about what the Gurus accomplished in the past may serve as a tool to make devotees oriented towards the Guru's teaching. Writing on moral anecdotes of secular character, Bauman (1988) suggests that stories "have a certain metaphorical as well as metonymic meaning, as a kind of extended name or label for the recurrent social problems and situations they portray", and, simultaneously "convey an attitude toward such situations and a strategy for dealing with them". Quoted speech, which often works as a final punch line to bring an anecdote to an end, may articulate an ideology of subversive capacity to evade the social problems conveyed.<sup>219</sup> In the story on Nanak, the Guru provides such an ideological content by giving a lecture in uttered speech. In the text *gurbani*, or the Guru's speech, is presented as quotations of Guru Granth Sahib. By projecting the operative effects of the Guru's power and teaching onto the disoriented Hindu elite, the narrative illustrates how those who put their trust and devotion in the Guru can escape the karmic result of bad actions. Revealing a character transformation of the Hindu pandits opens up the possibility for a future spiritual

<sup>219</sup> Bauman 1988: 76 – 77. Bauman quotes Bhaktin: "The speaking person in the novel is always to one degree or another, an *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes* [...] It is precisely as ideologemes that discourse becomes the object of representation in the novel" (Bauman 1988: 77).

transformation of those in the social reality, outside the text, who devotionally submit to the Guru's teaching.

#### MAKING PAST PRESENT THROUGH "THINGS"

The local Sikh history relates that when Guru Tegh Bahadur left Varanasi to continue his travels eastwards his disciple Kalyan Das and other devotees in Varanasi tearfully queried the Guru how they would be able to live without his auspicious sight. In response Guru Tegh Bahadur handed over his shirt (*kurta*) in Dhaka muslin, "after touching it to his body", and his wooden sandals. The Guru told his disciples that by seeing this shirt in love and devotion they would always get the sight of him.<sup>220</sup> By offering some of his clothes the Guru bridged the temporal and spatial separation between himself and the congregation, caused by his departure, and established his eternal presence at the location. In Nichibagh Gurdwara today the shirt and sandals have been displaced to showcases as markers of an event that occurred more than three hundred years ago. The objects have been given the status of relics because they were parts of the corporeal properties of Guru Tegh Bahadur, which he wore on his body and intentionally handed over to the congregation. Mundane garments that the Guru once used in everyday practices have been re-framed and attributed a sacrosanct status. Metonymically the relics are believed to store and mediate the power of the Guru and his wish to be remembered in Varanasi, that is, parts of the Guru corporeal presence continue to emanate power and evoke memories of an event in a common past which they claim to be a part of.

If narratives attempt to prove historical presences of the Sikhs Gurus and connect the contemporary community with a pristine past, then marked out geographical locations and material objects, such as relics and artefacts, forcefully support these stories. To erect a building labeled "historical" (*itihāsik*) is in itself an effort to link up with a common past. Clothes, weapons, letters and other items related with the human Gurus are held to constitute the material body of evidence of written depositions about the Gurus' deeds. The stories recounted and the "things" displayed are interdependent: a story discursively explains the historical event related to a relic or picture, while the object will affirm and substantiate the story told. Radley (1990) reminds us that the human activity to remember and create a past is a product of both human discourses and "the world of things". When material objects are removed from one context over time (e.g., functional or mundane usage) to be displaced and systematically arranged within another (e.g., church or museum) they "become marked out as indices of the past, as objects to 'remember by'."<sup>221</sup> Artefacts often survive in ways not premeditated by the owner or holder. A sword, for instance, may have outlived its functional aspects and instead becomes a condensed symbol that operates as historical "evidence" on which people build interpretations of history and

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<sup>220</sup> *Varanasi Dian Kuch Itihāsik Yadan*, p. 11.

<sup>221</sup> Radley 1990: 52.

by which they can re-invoke the contexts of which these objects once were a part.<sup>222</sup> Objects become the material aspects of a collective memory. The ways in which material things are intentionally ordered within demarcated spaces are social definitions that instruct people on what and how they should remember and invite them to engage with these objects in special ways, often through ritualized practices that aim to ensure unbroken relationships with the past. To identify, re-arrange and engage with these objects can be looked upon as strategies through which Sikhs commemorate and establish a continuing presence of the historical human Gurus.

#### RELICS AND SEATS OF THE GURUS

Like many other historical Sikh shrines, the gurdwaras in Varanasi accommodate religious “things” that can be divided into two broad categories: historical relics that claim the status of being corporeal belongings of the human Gurus and memorable artifacts that are manmade in modern times, such oil-paintings and framed bazaar posters portraying the Gurus, martyrs, pilgrimage sites and significant events in Sikh history. The former category of relics includes clothes and letters of the Gurus, that is, objects charged with sacred status because they have been in physical contact with the Sikh Gurus, but also particular geographical sites that are held to be *asan* – the “seat” of Guru Nanak and Tegh Bahadur during their visits in Varanasi. The Sanskrit noun *asan* bears several connotations; in general the term signifies a seat, and more particularly the seat of an ascetic, a yoga posture, or even the mat to sit on in prayers.<sup>223</sup> The word indicates a space of spiritual power and authority.

The local narrative recounts how the Gurus occupied physical sites in Varanasi, at which they sat down, and marked out their “seats” by entering into meditative states: Guru Nanak more spontaneously when he reached the city and gazed the beautiful garden, and Guru Tegh Bahadur in his daily routines of meditation. By assuming sitting postures for meditation the Gurus identified spaces of their authoritative presences, which came to be locative and spatial deictics of sanctity. Due to these occurrences, the devotees who owned the grounds on which the seats were sited – a garden and a room – could no longer keep their property under private ownership, but transferred it to the Gurus.<sup>224</sup> Accordingly, when the Gurus left Varanasi their presences were established at particular sites in the city that would come to function as religious meeting places for followers.

When the Sikh community, in the end of the 1960s, decided to construct a new gurdwara hall in Gurubagh a major challenge of the building plan was to determine the exact location of Guru Nanak’s seat. It was considered crucial to specify this spot since the Guru Granth Sahib was to be installed on the same seat. The existing shrine in the garden, built by Nirmala sants at some point in time, was of some guiding

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<sup>222</sup> Radley 1990: 54.

<sup>223</sup> McGregor 1997: 97.

<sup>224</sup> In the twentieth century the Gurus’ were registered as legal proprietors of the gurdwara in official records. See the first section of this chapter.



assistance. It held a small room around 9 to 10 square meters wide with a platform and a jujube tree (*beri*) on the outside.<sup>225</sup> Local Sikhs were of different opinions as to whether the platform or the area under the tree denoted the original seat of Guru Nanak. One elder man who grew up in gurdwara remembered that the architectural decision was taken in connection with the appearance of a white snake. Many people, including my interlocutor, recurrently saw a snake winding nearby the platform. At first people got very frightened, but realized it was a token of a divine intervention in the construction work: “We just folded our hands in respect and the snake was gone”, he said. Other informants alleged that white snakes are believed to be a form of God, which appears to give people assistance in particular situations,<sup>226</sup> in this case verifying a sacred space.

The exact location of Guru Nanak’s seat was however identified by a dream. The *granthi* of Gurubagh Gurdwara dreamt that Guru Nanak came to him and said “At the spot where you are sleeping right now, there I was seated and sung, not at the place where *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* is done today”. After the *granthi* told about his vision the next morning the congregation drew the conclusion that the Nirmala sants apparently had built the Guru’s seat on the wrong spot. These two incidents – the appearance of a snake and the dream – were taken as proof of a divine interference in the building plan and consequently the managing committee decided to construct the gurdwara hall on the ground floor and keep the seat of Guru Granth Sahib a little beside the original platform. Adjusting the location of the seat established a permanent presence and continuity of the Guru’s authority at a particular site. When people today are entering gurdwara Gurubagh they bow and pay respect to the pristine seat of Guru Nanak as well as that of Guru Granth Sahib.

In Nichibagh Gurdwara the “seat” of Guru Tegh Bahadur was decided to be a small underground chamber located in the right-hand corner of the gurdwara hall, which today is used as bedroom (*sachkhand*) for texts of the Guru Granth Sahib. The chamber is singled out as the exact spot on which the Guru did meditation – *tapas* or *tapashya* – daily in the nectar hours (*amritvela*). The room is consequently called *tapasthan*, or “the place of meditation”, and spatializes the Guru’s seat and austere practices. For this reason the chamber has become a place of veneration in itself. Placed on a small stool in front of the entrance to *tapasthan* the gurdwara employees keep a *jyoti*, a brass-mounted oil lamp that should burn day and night. People in the gurdwara are unsure of the original reasons for keeping the oil lamp, but still claim

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<sup>225</sup> The local history narrates that Guru Nanak occupied this platform in the beautiful garden when he arrived at Varanasi (*Varanasi Dian Kuch Ithasik Yadan*).

<sup>226</sup> An elderly Sikh woman narrated how a white snake guided her to go on a pilgrimage to Patna Sahib. One morning when she was taking a bath at her house a white snake appeared on the ground, it stared at her and then disappeared. She was not frightened but was surprised to not find any snake nest or pit. The following day she travelled to Patna Sahib on request of her husband, who was ill following an accident. As she recounted, when she inquired to religious people at Patna Sahib about the white snake she was told that it was the form of God that came to inspire her for pilgrimage.

they have continued a tradition of burning the lamp since Guru Tegh Bahadur's visit.<sup>227</sup>



*Tapasthan at Nichibagh Gurdwara*

It is yet noteworthy that the burning lamp is placed outside the space where Guru Tegh Bahadur did *tapas* – a word which signified the purifying and creative/destructive heat of fire in the *Rigveda* and in later Hindu literature connotes austerity practices believed to generate a heat in the body and mind which will burn impurities and karma in the human condition.<sup>228</sup> From a symbolic viewpoint the burning oil lamp can be seen as an index of the place at which the Guru's internal meditation generated "heat" which purified a space and continued to transmit powers to devotees. It marks out "the place of heat", that is, a place transmitting powers from the Guru's meditative practices. In connection with full moon days and the

<sup>227</sup> The practice of lighting oil-lamps in the gurdwaras is sometimes subject for conflicting views in local discourses. On one occasion in 2001 a visiting Sikh propagandist from Punjab passed severe criticism on the custom of keeping a *gyoti* in Nichibagh gurdwara. In one conversation he said, "When Guru Gobind Singh ji did *prakash* of Guru Granth Sahib, he lit the lamp of *gurbani*, so there is no need of lighting these lamps." A Sikh student from Benares Hindu University, who overheard the propagandist's words while passing by, disapproved of the condemnation and interrupted the conversation. The student argued that people have faith in this practice and wishes have indeed come true after people have been lightening lamps for forty days in a row. As he reasoned, this must mean the practice does invoke some power.

<sup>228</sup> See e.g. Kaelber 1979.

commemoration day of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom in 1675 devotees offer money and light candles and incense on this place. Sometimes people sit in front of *tapasthan* for hours, and through their sitting postures, recitations of *gurbani*, and remembrance of God, embody the ideal of concentrated meditation associated with the human Guru. When people have special wishes they make individual promises to go daily to *tapasthan* for forty days in a row to perform various worship acts – light candles, pray, and drink the nectar water of river Ganga that Guru Tegh Bahadur conjured – with expectations that God will reciprocate them in favorable ways. Some families in Varanasi can “testify” that they have been blessed with the birth of a son after regular visits and prayers at the place. Ritualized activities around this space draw their meaning and authority from their alleged connection with the human Guru. The space was indicated by the Guru and is believed to metonymically preserve and radiate an objective power of his deeds through which people may benefit both spiritually and materially.

On all these ritual occasions spatial codifications of social behavior and order exist in the presence of the Guru's seat. The *tapasthan* is held to be pure space which only *Amritdhari* Sikhs are allowed to enter. The laity is therefore spatially separated from the chamber by two doors with large window panels, through which they can look into the room. To fortify the historical identification of this place, a large and garlanded picture portraying Guru Tegh Bahadur seated in a meditating posture has been placed in the chamber behind the four-poster bed for scriptures. The picture is usually illuminated with spotlights to catch the attention of visitors. The iconographic representations, along with the ritual behaviors, create an imaginary presence of the historical Guru – a presence that is further reinforced by the Guru's relics.

On the left side of the entrance to *tapasthan*, Guru Tegh Bahadur's *kurta* in Dhaka muslin, touched by the Guru's body and handed over to the congregation before his departure from Varanasi, is kept in a showcase. On the other side of the doorway, fourteen *hukam-namas* – historical letters from Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh and his wife Mata Sahib to the Sikh congregation in Varanasi and Mirzapur – are displayed.<sup>229</sup> Of the twenty-two letters written by Guru Tegh Bahadur's own hand in cursive style, eight are preserved at Varanasi and have provided the

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<sup>229</sup> During my fieldwork in 2000 – 2001 seventeen photocopies of *hukam-namas* (including copies of the main text and marginal notes) were displayed in showcases, while the original letters were kept in a cupboard at the gurdwara office in Nichibagh gurdwara. When I returned in 2005 the photocopies had been replaced by the fourteen original *hukam-namas*. The *hukam-namas* are generally divided into two categories: those written by Guru's hands and treated as genuine “autographs” of the Gurus, and those recorded by scribes with only marginal notes of the Guru. The autographs normally open with names of the devotees to which the letter is addressed, followed by behests and blessings of the Guru. When letters are written by scribes Guru's own words are found in the left hand top corner of the letter, whereas the scribe added dates and gave the letter a final touch.

local community fame in the Sikh world.<sup>230</sup>

Although the *hukam-namas* of Guru Tegh Bahadur do not bear any dates, Fauja Singh (1996) suggests that the letters can be dated to 1667 – 1668,<sup>231</sup> the years following the Guru's supposed visit to Varanasi. Several letters of Guru Tegh Bahadur are directed to Bhai Kalyan Das, who apparently operated as a representative for the local community. The remaining handwritten letters ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh are dated at the beginning of the eighteenth century and one single letter from Mata Sahib is of the 1730s.<sup>232</sup> Though it is important to notify that *hukam-namas* are not regarded as museum specimen that people contemplate merely because of historical interest; the letters are treated as religious relics that sanctify the place and evoke powerful responses owing to their believed physical contact with the Gurus, being penned by their own hands. To obtain the auspicious sight (*darshan*) of these documents is an act of worship and veneration that will grant blessings to the viewer. It is the corporeality of the objects – the Gurus' bodily contact and touch – that provides the status of relics in the first place and engages worshippers in a direct way.



A letter by Guru Tegh Bahadur

Comprised in the category of Sikh relics are also articles which the Gurus more accidentally dropped or left at particular places, or things that they intentionally sent or presented to congregations. These things may have served social functions in the past, such as being cloths, sandals, and weapon the Gurus wore. The local story in Varanasi reiterates that Guru Tegh Bahadur intentionally selected a shirt to be a remnant of his visit. Even natural objects that the Guru conjured up by miraculous actions are treated as relics which possess and transfer spiritual power. In Nichibagh Gurdwara the holy well is a monument to Guru Tegh Bahadur's marvelous deed of submitting river Ganga to his order. People believe that river Ganga continues to flow to this well. Local accounts bear witness of how the people have been relieved from serious troubles and even fatal diseases after they have regularly ingested the

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<sup>230</sup> See Ganda Singh 1999, Anand 1970. In addition, there is also one letter containing Guru Tegh Bahadur's customarily invocation *Ik Omkar Satguru*, followed by a short note.

<sup>231</sup> Fauja Singh 1996: 35.

<sup>232</sup> Two *hukam-namas* ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh are dated to 1702 and 1708. See also Ganda Singh 1999.

nectar-water.<sup>233</sup> Subsequently, all these relics – natural or manmade – have been displaced to a religious context in which they are arranged and labeled in modes to evoke memories of the past and enduring devotional bonds with the human Gurus. An everyday shirt that Guru Tegh Bahadur once wore is now titled “the Respected Shirt” (*Chola Sahib*) and framed in a glass case as a memento. The well (*Bauli Sahib*) is similarly enclosed with marble edges and its water used like Ganga-nectar (*Ganga amrit*) to be ingested for purifying and curative purposes.

Altogether these objects and spaces in Nichibagh Gurdwara create a narrative in themselves without relying on verbal discourses – the “seat” of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ganga water that sprung forth by his power, the shirt which he left behind when he separated from Varanasi, and the letters he wrote to the community thereafter. The ways in which people engage with relics also suggest that these objects are not merely monumental representations of the past but believed to manifest an enduring presence and power of the human Gurus. When people are entering Nichibagh Gurdwara the minimal ritual procedure would include gestures of veneration to the relics and the place where Guru Tegh Bahadur meditated: firstly they give offerings and pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib seated in the centre of the gurdwara, and then continue to *tapasthan* to repeat the ritual pattern in front of the relics. Upon leaving the gurdwara visitors will receive food, blessed by the Guru-scripture, and take a sip of the Ganga nectar from the well. The Guru’s deeds in the past are believed to benefit and act upon followers through the relics and continue to instill attitudes of veneration. Guru Tegh Bahadur is certainly not believed to be present in any physical sense, but for devotees the power and effects of his deeds are available in a similar way as three hundred and forty years ago.

#### PORTRAITS AND NARRATIVE PICTURING

Another way of making the past present is achieved through memorable artefacts, in other words, manmade objects and visual renderings intentionally displaced and exhibited for the purpose of commemorating and glorifying Sikh virtues, deeds and dedications in history.<sup>234</sup> Consistent with Sikh theology the formless God cannot be visually depicted nor invoked in any man-made art form to be worshipped, except for the divine words mediated and recorded by the Gurus. For this reason, iconographic representations of the divine, and iconolatry of any type has been widely

<sup>233</sup> The *granthi*, for example, recounted how a man from Bombay was cured of cancer by conducting selfless service (*seva*) in Nichibagh Gurdwara and drinking Ganga-water from the well for forty days in a row. After he returned to Bombay and was medically examined he was declared free from cancer.

<sup>234</sup> Included in the category of “memorable artefacts” are elegant gifts that have been given to sacred sites by devoted Sikhs in history. The Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, for example, preserves a set of precious gifts, such as arms, canopies, flywhisk, and jewels, which have been presented to the shrine by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and other renowned Sikhs. These articles are carefully wrapped and locked in a treasury, and only displayed to the public at special ritualized occasions (Madanjit Kaur 1983: 133 – 137).

rejected in the Sikh community. Similar to Islamic traditions, the Sikhs developed calligraphies of verses from their scripture from the sixteenth century, and during the centuries to follow paintings of the Sikh Gurus became a popular way of portraying their lives and deeds in visual forms.<sup>235</sup> In the course of time the religious art of the Sikhs ranged from courtly portraits of the Sikh Gurus to numismatics, weapons, books and other objects, upon which scriptural syllables or longer hymns sometimes were inscribed.<sup>236</sup> In modern times, new technologies of media have greatly fostered the innovation and development of popular Sikh art.<sup>237</sup> Reproductions of religious signs, inscriptions of God's name or verses from Guru Granth Sahib, and bazaar posters depicting the Gurus, sacred sites, memorable events, and so on, are today ubiquitously manifested in the religious lives of Sikhs. According to the conventional iconographic rule it is permitted to visually represent the Sikh Gurus as historical persons. The representations should be restricted to the two dimensional medium of pictures and paintings. Unlike worship in the Hindu traditions, the Gurus should not be portrayed in three dimensional images (like temple icons and statues) nor do human actors have authority to symbolically represent their personhood, lives, and deeds in religious dramas or moving images.<sup>238</sup> The Gurus are therefore solely depicted through standardized portraits that have gained public approval and which can be utilized as didactic vehicles to communicate stories about the Gurus' teaching and deeds.

Major Sikh shrines and pilgrimage centers often accommodate separate wards which go by the English name of "museum" and exhibit framed paintings and posters that depict episodes from the lives of the Gurus, historical martyrs, and sometimes photographs of war heroes and saintly persons in modern times.<sup>239</sup> In these galleries visitors are taken on a sequenced didactical tour through visualized anecdotes of the lives of the Gurus and other events held memorable. Minor gurdwara, which cannot facilitate "museums", sometimes create smaller galleries of popular calendar art in the dining hall or at some other place in the temple complex. In addition to portraits of the ten Sikh Gurus, these systematically arranged reproductions

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<sup>235</sup> Artistic calligraphies in Gurmukhi are to be found in some of the earliest manuscripts of Guru Granth Sahib in the sixteenth century. The seventeenth century *Janam-sakhi* literature added miniature paintings to depict different events in Guru Nanak's life, and some early manuscripts of Guru Granth Sahib from the same time period opened with portraits of the Gurus.

<sup>236</sup> See e.g. Aijazuddin 1979, Arshi 1986, Brown 1999, Stronge 1999.

<sup>237</sup> For the development of Sikh art and modern bazaar prints, consult McLeod 1991.

<sup>238</sup> In 2001 the *Akal Takht* and the SGPC opened a debate on this matter when it was reported that more than fifty statues of the Sikh Gurus and Sikh warriors had been installed in Punjab and other states and the trend seemed to be on the rise. In 2004 the SGPC formally announced that statues of the Gurus are prohibited in Sikhism (See *The Tribune*, 2001-07-18, 2001-08-01, 2004-01-22). During festivals and the *Khalsa* initiation ceremony (*Khande di pahul*), for example, a group of five senior men will dress up and play the part of *panj pyare*, "the five beloved", who were the first to undergo the first ceremony in 1699. The five men stand for the most esteemed and loyal disciples of Guru Gobind Singh and represent the collective of Sikhs.

<sup>239</sup> For an overview of Sikh art history, see Brown 1999.

often epitomize key persons and moments in Sikh history, like the two martyrdoms of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur, the creation of Khalsa in 1699, photographs of the battered *Akal Takht* after *Operations Bluestar* in 1984, and idealized pictures of the shining Harimandir Sahib in post-1984 times, just to mention a few examples. Individual spectators will certainly respond differently to the visual representations, depending on their own positioning of the self in relation to the collective past. But the way in which these artifacts are selected and arranged in permanent settings of the gurdwaras (or if temporarily employed in festival processions) reflects ontological choices that simultaneously instruct on what in the past is considered to be of vital importance and worthy of remembrance. The pictures selected are normative fragments, adduced to be testimonies of historical persons and instanced events, which in the public exhibition of a “museum” or a gallery are pieced together to imagery anthologies, or archives of visual memory, by which people may recollect and reconstruct narratives of a shared past.

Framed pictures of the Sikh Gurus, heroic disciples, and important pilgrimage sites are dispersedly decorating the walls within the gurdwara complexes in Varanasi. Given the history of the local gurdwaras the dominant images are standardized portrait paintings or framed bazaar posters of Guru Nanak, Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. The iconographic characteristic of all these representations is the clichéd human features of the Gurus, although exalted by a radiant halo lightening around their heads to display the manifestation of spiritual power. What works as visual cues to their identities and also sets the various depictions apart are the details of postures, dresses and attributes they hold in their hands. Whether standing or seated cross-legged, Guru Nanak is portrayed as a white-bearded meditating man. He wears a saffron-coloured shirt, covered with a cloak, and a spherical turban adorned with a rosary on the top. His right hand is always raised in a protecting gesture with *ik omkar*, the first syllable in *Guru Granth Sahib*, imprinted in the palm. As the Guru who suffered martyrdom, Tegh Bahadur is dressed in simple white clothes and a turban with rosary. Seated in a meditating posture on a white sheet and cushion, he is rapt in contemplation, with his hands folded and eyes closed. In contrast to the two visual interpretations that display piety, Guru Gobind Singh is a younger dark-bearded man, adorned with various jewels and arms – bows, discuss, shield, sword, spear, quiver of arrows – like an active warrior ready for the battle. Wearing a royal blue dress and cone-shaped turban he either stands or is seated on a horse with a white hawk in his left hand. The portraits are shared visions of the Gurus that represent the complementary ideologies of the pious saint and the active soldier, personified in Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, and the historical transformation of Sikhism from a pacifist community to the militarized Khalsa.<sup>240</sup>

In Varanasi, the symbolic content of devotion and social activism that these images carry often determines the locations at which the portraits are situated and the contexts in which they are used. Pictures of the contemplating Guru Nanak or Guru

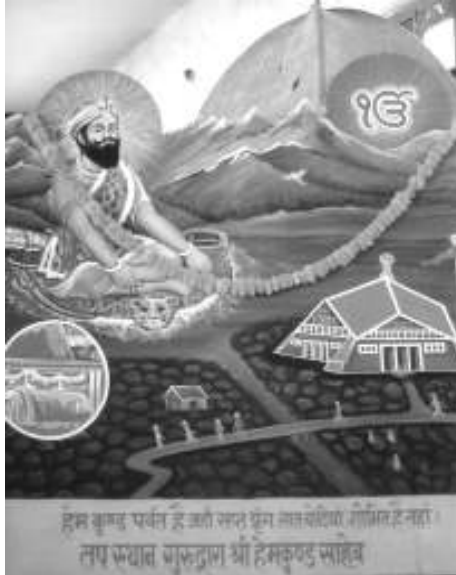
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<sup>240</sup> See Kaur Singh 2004: 54.

Tegh Bahadur in sitting positions, for example, are to be found at places where people are expected to devote themselves to practices of a similar kind. In Gurubagh Gurdwara a garlanded portrait of Guru Nanak has been hung up above the scriptural throne, facing the visual field of the seated congregation, and by its placement indexes the seat which Nanak occupied on his visit. In outreaching propaganda directed to the broader society, in contrast, images of Guru Gobind Singh bearing weapons are more frequently utilized, in combination with texts describing him as the fearless fighter of freedom and justice who created Khalsa to make the armed Sikhs serve these ends. In the gurdwara setting most of these portraits are displayed in places not to attract acts of worship of devotees (such as on high up levels or behind windows), but only to be viewed and function as reminders of the past. In response to a seemingly contradiction of decorating the gurdwaras with images of the Gurus and at the same time reject image worship, a male interlocutor told a story about a boy who was madly in love with a girl and was promised her hand only if he would pass a stiff examination in school. The boy agreed to the condition and at the time of his exam brought along a photograph of the girl, which he glanced at after each question attempted. When the teachers suspected the boy for cheating, he replied that he was only looking at his source of inspiration. In the same way the Sikhs draw their spiritual inspiration from images of the Gurus, the man explained.

On a different devotional scale, however, portraits of the Gurus may serve several religious functions to individual Sikhs. An elderly Sikh man who ran a retail shop in the city centre of Varanasi used to open his shop every morning with an *Arti* ceremony by circulating sweet-scented incense before a set of frame pictures of Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, Baba Deep Singh and the Hindu goddess Lakshmi seated beside Ganesh. Holding the incense, he would continue to the entrance of the shop where he repeated the act in front of the work place and over his desk and the safe. He would then pour out *Ganga amrit*, or a purified water-nectar which he had collected from the well in Nichibagh Gurdwara, into his cupped hand, drink most of it himself and then sprinkle the remainder over his forehead and turban. In case workers or customers were present during the minute-long morning worship, he made sure to offer them a share of the sacred water. In a similar fashion other Sikhs would pay homage to visual representations of the Gurus by offering incense and flowers to framed bazaar posters that were displayed in places of honor, such as small altars in the living-room at the house, near the cash-counter in the shop or at other micro-settings. Others would wear miniature pictures of the Sikhs Gurus, coated with plastic, in the front pocket nearby the heart, like amulets for protection, blessings and devotional aid. Individuals will respond to the visual representations in many different ways, while the gurdwaras attempt to set norms of collective worship and devotional attitudes.





Guru Gobind Singh meditates in the Himalaya



Portraits of the Gurus are taken out in procession

Although portraits of the Sikh Gurus are convention-bound paintings or duplicated prints of the same, more experimental representations appear in pictures with motifs that depict episodes of the Gurus' lives. The gurdwara committee in Varanasi has engaged a Hindu artist to paint popular anecdotes in the Sikh tradition. At the time of my fieldwork several of these art works were exhibited in religious processions on festival days and otherwise preserved in Gurubagh Gurdwara. Two paintings which link up with mythological events at pilgrimage sites and popular legends drawn from the broader Sikh tradition may exemplify.

The first one renders the idealized landscape of *Hemkunt Sahib*, literally "the receptacle of ice", which is a Sikh shrine at the height of 15000 feet in the Himalayan foothills.<sup>241</sup> In the biographical work *Bachitar Nanak*, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, it is said that the Guru was meditating at a place with seven peaks before he was born to the world. The exact spot of the Guru's *tapasthan*, or place of meditation, was located by a Nirmala scholar in the nineteenth century. In the 1930s a Sikh named Sant Sohan Singh surveyed the area and found a location with seven peaks which was determined to be the Guru's seat of meditation. A gurdwara was constructed in 1936 on the bank of a sweet-watered mountain lake.

The second painting depicts the popular anecdote of *Panja Sahib*, or the "holy palm", derived from a local legend on how Guru Nanak stopped a rock by raising his hand and thereby imprinted it with the mark of his palm (*panja*). The place where the imprint of his hand is displayed is therefore called *Panja Sahib*. As this story was

<sup>241</sup> For an anthropological study of pilgrimage to Hemkunt Sahib, consult Michaud 1998.

retold in Varanasi, Guru Nanak visited the village of Hasan Abdal in present Pakistan with his companion Mardana. When Mardana was feeling thirsty Guru Nanak advised him to bring water from a fakir who kept a spring on a mountain. Upon being informed that Nanak was an incarnation of God in *kaliyug*, the fakir became jealous and refused Mardana water, saying that a divine incarnation should be able to conjure his own spring. To challenge the fakir Guru Nanak opened a new spring, which eventually drained all water from the fakir's spring. In anger the fakir threw down a large rock which Guru Nanak stopped by raising one hand.

In the two paintings the local artist has kept recognizable appearances and attributes of the Sikh Gurus as in standardized bazaar posters, but reversed their typical postures and acts: Guru Nanak is attentively present and acts in the world, while Guru Gobind Singh is mediating in tranquility. The painter has exploited his artistic freedom to combine distinctive features of Guru Gobind Singh with popular images of a Hindu character who also practices austerities in the Himalayas: Lord Shiva. On a leopard skin floating on the celestial lake, the disarmed Gobind Singh sits in the yoga posture with his eyes closed. All attributes of weapons are present but laid down and spread around him. He wears a saffron-colored turban with a steel discus on top and his right hand holds a rosary. Similar to popular pictures of the contemplating Shiva, his body is covered with the skin of a leopard.

The scenes of the two anecdotes which have posed as models for the paintings – *Hemkunt Sahib* and *Panja Sahib* – are two cherished pilgrimage sites in the Sikh community today.<sup>242</sup> To Sikhs who have visited these sites the paintings can function as schematic mementos that trigger memory of the related stories, personal experiences of past pilgrimages, and conduce mental re-visits.<sup>243</sup> The paintings may also work as didactic means to remember stories of the Gurus' wonders and evoke imaginative pilgrimages to places that people have heard of but never been able to visit. These narrative pictures are yet dependent on verbal data to realize the meanings they may obtain. Discourses and action events outside the paintings provide the context in which the visual representations are embedded and given meanings. During festival days the paintings are taken out in city processions and displayed to spectators not necessarily familiar with the narrative tradition. On these occasions the paintings metonymically demonstrate publicly acknowledged Sikh virtues and signs. The interaction between spectators and the body of Sikhs displaying paintings creates a

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<sup>242</sup> It is noteworthy that almost a half of my informants in the semi-structured interviews asserted they had been on pilgrimage to *Hemkunt Sahib*, while *Panja Sahib* was a more difficult destination because of its location in the town Hasan Abdal in Pakistan.

<sup>243</sup> In modern gurdwaras outside India, it is quite common to decorate the walls behind the scriptural throne with large pictures or paintings of Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar. These pictures are often painted in more exaggerated colours, sometimes with illuminations, and are intentionally placed at locations where they will meet the eyes of the congregation. Apart from purely decorative purposes the pictures may evoke memories and imaginaries of Harimandir Sahib, even imaginary revisits, to all who have been on pilgrimage to Amritsar.

living moment during which examples of principal circumstances in Sikh history and characteristic deeds of the Gurus' are mediated and give legitimacy to a collective past.



## TWO



### INSIDE THE GURU'S GATE

#### CONCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

At 4.30 in morning the gurdwara is still slumbering in silence when Bhai Santa, the assistant *granthi* of Nichibagh Gurdwara, commences the daily installation of the Guru Granth Sahib on its royal throne. It is *amritvela*, the most auspicious time of the day, which ranges from 2 am in the morning and four hours forward until the sun starts to throw light on a new day.<sup>244</sup> It is considered to be the favorable time for meditation and contemplation and it is within these hours the Sikh scripture should be installed. After Bhai Santa has taken a bath, tied his turban and recited the daily verses of *Japji Sahib*, he unlocks the door to *sachkhand*, “the abode of truth” – the room where all scriptures are resting on a four-poster bed covered by decorated sheets. In an act of respect he touches one of the scriptures while uttering the *mulmantra*, the very first hymn of Guru Granth Sahib, as a greeting, and then puts a small cloth on top of his turban. He uncovers one scripture, which is tightly wrapped in a white cotton sheet and enclosed by cooling robes (*rumalas*) of blue silk adjusted to the hot season. Bhai Santa lifts up the scripture to place it on his head, he closes the door to *sachkhand*, and while repeatedly chanting the divine name “Satnam Vahiguru” he carries Guru Granth Sahib to the throne in the centre of the gurdwara to place the scripture on its royal seat. After Bhai Santa has seated himself behind the throne in a lower position facing Guru Granth Sahib, he again lifts up the scripture and places it on his head. Holding the book cover with his right hand, he is arranging with the other hand the cushions and cloths on which the scripture will be placed during the day. After this he puts down the scripture and opens the bundle of cloths from all sides until the scripture is fully uncovered and then temporarily veil it with a cloth. Once again Bhai Santa places Guru Granth Sahib on his head while he folds the scriptural clothes and removes dust and dirt on the seat before he lets the scripture descend to the throne. At this moment Guru Granth Sahib is considered seated, but not yet opened. To the sound of his *mulmantra* chanting Bhai Santa therefore continues to greet the scripture by bowing down until his forehead touches to the lower part of the book-cover, and then opens it with both hands. In a careful gesture he passes his palms over the spread and puts two small robes on both sides of the cover to protect

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<sup>244</sup> *Vela* refers to “time or moment, a time of day”. McGreggor, 1997: 935. There are different indigenous interpretations of the time period that *amritvela* spans. Other interlocutors stated that the time between midnight and four in the morning is *amritvela*.

it throughout the day. Guru Granth Sahib is now installed on the royal throne and Bhai Santa fully covers the scripture with a large robe before he starts the daily reading of the divine order (*Hukam*).

If the previous chapter familiarized the reader with the historical and social perspectives of the Sikh community in Varanasi, this chapter will provide descriptions of local positions and dispositions to the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. Particularly it focuses on how an emic epistemology (i.e., knowledge that Sikhs regard as legitimate) and attitudes towards the Sikh scripture are constructed and sustained by means of discursive and ritual strategies. By discursive strategies I mean the ways in which people explain and speak of the scripture in conversations, which in turn are based on personal experiences along with material reproduced from local legends and narratives of the broader Sikh tradition. Ritual strategies, on the other hand, signify external methods of formalized action by which people create and confirm perceptions of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The chapter consists of four major sections: the first pertains to local conceptions of the Guru Granth Sahib and the scripture's perceived relationship to the divine, the human Gurus, and Sikh devotees. The second part describes how the Sikhs create sacred time and space for the Guru by religious behaviors and organization of spaces in the gurdwara. The third section directs attention towards the people surrounding the sacred scripture, and investigates what significations lay people ascribe to the normative Khalsa identity and how different categories of professional performers in the gurdwara are motivated, trained, and expected to act and behave in service of the Guru and the congregation. The final part of the chapter focuses particularly on the careful handling of the manifested scriptural form of the Guru – the printing process, transportations, installations, and the ritual disposal of old texts – which can be viewed as the religious measures by which Sikhs establish and confirm the agency of a living and personal Guru.

## 2.1. CONCEPTUALIZING A GURU

The notion of “guru” is both an ancient and widespread concept in India. In common parlance the word usually signifies a superior teacher who possesses certain knowledge and imparts guidance to his or her student(s) (*chela* [Sanskrit], *sikh* [Punjabi]). To study and learn anything in life, whether it concerns material or spiritual learning processes, individuals are considered to need the guidance of a knowledgeable preceptor. “‘Gu’ means darkness, ‘Gu-ru’ means the one who takes you out of darkness. There are many suns and moons, but they cannot illuminate you from inside. If you

don't have a guru there will be darkness", one of the local Sikh *granthis* in Varanasi alluded to a popular interpretation of the word guru.<sup>245</sup>

In different layers of the Indian society the guru–chela relationship has been institutionalized and continues to be a lived system of knowledge and learning, most noticeable in contexts of performing arts and religious education where practical training and oral transmission of knowledge prevail. In local and regional musical traditions of India, for instance, a trainee performer will fully submit to a master and during a period of apprenticeship, often extending over years, learn the art by theoretical instructions, practical training and imitations. It is expected from the novice to adopt a personal lifestyle and discipline according to the tradition of adherence and perform services (*seva*) to the teacher. Pursuing knowledge is not conceived as a personal acquisition, but set in the context of a long-termed, sometimes life-long, hierarchical relationship between the superior guru and the inferior novice. The credit for achieving performance skills will consequently not be ascribed to the individual performer, but the guru and sometimes the whole lineage of gurus of the tradition to which the performer belongs. To have learnt an art form under the guidance and in service of a guru provides more legitimization to the individual performer, rather than being independently self-taught, although the disciple may and sometimes should improve some aspects of his or her performance skill better than the master to obtain individuality, personal style, and not just develop into a mere replication of the guru.

In religious contexts the concept of guru is broadened to encompass soteriological concerns and generally signifies an enlightened preceptor, who has been graced with spiritual knowledge and conferred an obligation to guide others. The religious guru represents a crucial agent standing between ordinary humans and God to illuminate the path towards salvation and through whose teaching and person the divine becomes accessible on earth. In the various religious cults on the Indian sub-continent followers of a spiritual guru may be lay persons or devout disciples, the latter of which obediently serve the guru for years to assimilate a teaching before the guru will confer a formal initiation (*dikhsa*) by giving a mantra, a glance, or a blessing, believed to produce transmission of spiritual power and even enlightenment.

The Sikh conceptualization of the term guru conjures up several images that go well beyond its common meaning and application in the Indian culture. Firstly, the word is used as a designation of the formless God, often prefixed by the Punjabi term for "truth" (i.e., Sat-Guru), and the divine words which God generates and reveals to humanity in history. Secondly, the term guru has come to signify ten historical persons, from Nanak to Gobind Singh, who lived and operated in Northern India as spiritual preceptors and worldly leaders of the Sikh community during an era of 239 years. Subsequent to the developments at the turn and the beginning of the eight-

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<sup>245</sup> According to Cole, the term guru can be etymologically traced to *Aiteraya Upanishad*, in which the guru is presented as the one who gives light (*ru*) by eradicating darkness (*gu*) and ignorance in humans (Cole 1982a: 2).

eenth century, the term is more strongly associated with the Sikh scripture – *Guru Granth Sahib* – and the Sikh community – the *Guru Panth* – the first of which now inhabits spiritual authority as the personal guru of the Sikhs and the second which signifies the temporal power of the Sikh collective as represented by religious institutions. For believers, the categories evoked by the single word guru are often perceived as interrelated and concern matters of generation and progression: human Gurus were born to the world in a concrete moment of history to make presence of divine words and messages which continue to live through the scripture. The theological and anthropological possibilities which the concept of guru engenders among local Sikhs is the major theme of this and the following sections of this chapter, however, with sharp focus on the scripture – the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Because what remains unique for Sikhism, as the religion is lived and practiced today, is the supreme authority that Sikhs are attributing to the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the central role the scripture plays in their devotional and ritual life. Unlike other traditions in India, which presuppose that an enlightenment guru is or was a human being, believing Sikhs would assert that their scripture possesses the same agency as a personal Guru.

The authoritative tradition of the broader Sikh community lays claim on an interpretation of the scripture as enshrining the enduring agency of a Guru. Whether practicing Sikhs will comply with this understanding or not depends upon what individuals and the local communities hold to be right or wrong. Perceptions and attitudes towards the *Guru Granth Sahib* that local Sikhs in Varanasi express in action and verbalize in conversations can often be placed along a continuum of stances. On a secularized side are those Sikhs who will claim that the scripture is merely a “holy book”, comparable to the sacred scriptures of other world religions, which contain a teaching to study and translate into social action in the everyday life. A more exclusive view on the opposite side would assert that *Guru Granth Sahib* is indeed a manifestation of God and speak of the text in terms of a deity. At the centre of the spectrum, however, is the most common view which acknowledges that the *Guru Granth Sahib* is both a Guru of the Sikhs and a holy text that enshrines words of divine origin.

In the course of one conversation, a 24-year-old Sikh woman in Varanasi said that if I was to understand the Sikh way of perceiving the text I should imagine the *Guru Granth Sahib* as a precious artifact with three separate but interrelated sides: the scripture is an abode of divine words revealed in sound and recorded by the human Gurus; it is the present living Guru; and a holy scripture storing a teaching to comprehend and implement in social life. Although the formless God is the final target of devotion, the object of worship should be the *Guru Granth Sahib* because its interior – the words and teaching – is the Guru who mediates relationships between humans and God and shows the way to attain liberation, the woman reasoned. The three-folded notion of the *Guru Granth Sahib* is reflected in the ways by which local Sikhs address their scripture in colloquial speech. Except for the ordinary title “Guru book” (*Guru Granth*), added with a suffix of reverence (*Sahib ji*), they frequently refer to their scripture as the “Guru-king” (*Guru Maharaj ji*), “emperor” (*Patshahi*), “God” (*Bhagwan ji*), or simply use a common title of respect for holy men (*Baba ji*) when



speaking of interaction contexts that presuppose the physical presence of the text. While presenting exegetical expositions or supporting moral values with references to verses in the scripture, it is more common to use the terms “Guru’s speech” (*gurbani*) or the “Guru’s teaching” (*gurmat*). The choice of designation depends upon the religious and cultural stance of the individual speaker and the situational context of conversation. People have differing and changeable convictions and language expressions depending upon their socio-cultural background, including the variables of gender, age, caste/clan, and ethnic belonging, and the specific situation and person they are communicating with. A male Sikh convert originating from the lower strata of the Hindu society is likely to articulate a slightly different interpretation than a *khatiri* woman born in a Sikh middle-class family of Punjab, even if both relate to norms imparted by the gurdwara and public discourses. Verbal records of people cannot be seen as blueprints of some inner ideas since human reasoning is continually exposed to variations and alterations due to social and cognitive factors. They are merely representations that people make within the boundaries of situational conversations. Aware of these limitations, the ideas put into words and frozen in interviews may yet point towards a few generally shared perceptions that comprise three categorically separate but ontologically related aspects of the Guru Granth Sahib, conceived as a Guru worthy of majestic and personifying epithets and a book containing divine essence and instructions mediated by its human predecessors.

In order to move somewhat closer to an understanding of the various meanings Sikhs attach to the Guru Granth Sahib one has to take into consideration the web of relationships which constitute the context of the scripture’s role and situation at the present, and the devotional stances that contemporary Sikhs express within the framework of their relationships to the text. Firstly, one should observe the *onto-theological relationships* that Sikhs believe existed between ten Gurus and the divine, and which legitimize notions of words emanating from an original divine source to be transmitted in the speech and writings of the human Gurus. For many Sikhs the words comprised in the Guru Granth Sahib are considered to be the voice of the true Guru, or God, made accessible in the sacred text and whenever its hymns are activated in acts of devotion. Secondly, one should take into account the *historical relationships* between the human Gurus and the Guru Granth Sahib in order to understand the means by which Sikhs have come to view and treat their scripture as a personal Guru. The Guru Granth Sahib was created and canonized by the human Gurus and eventually ascended to the office of the Guru in a human succession line. As a consequence of this historical shift of authority, the scripture is said to encapsulate the teaching and “spirit” of the ten Gurus and inherited habits that presumably existed in the culture of its human predecessors. Looking at contemporary practices within the local community of Varanasi, I will also suggest that Sikhs act and refer to the Guru Granth Sahib in terms of having *social relationships* to their text that have been shaped by human relations and which are continually maintained by devotional acts. Within the framework of these relationships Sikhs invest the Guru Granth Sahib social agency of a living Guru who has authority and capacity to establish links with the

divine. Simultaneously they approach the scripture as a text to read and semantically comprehend for pursuing spiritual knowledge and guidance in life. To Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib is the Guru perpetually alive and embodied in the body of a book which reveals divine knowledge to everyone who knows how to perceive it.

#### HUMAN MESSENGERS OF DIVINE WORDS

Unlike secular historiography which frequently translates the person and life of Guru Nanak from the socio-cultural and political contexts in which the Guru operated and borrowed ideas from other mystics, believing Sikhs would rather emphasize the uniqueness of Nanak as the liberated bard who was entrusted by God to convey knowledge directly from a transcendence source. Many local Sikhs would underline that Nanak did not have any personal guru himself, but they exclusively reserve the term “guru” for *shabad*, the primordial Word made manifest in the world through *gurbani*, or the utterances and instructions of human preceptors. In essence, the Word is believed to be of a divine nature or even an aspect of the formless God. Anyone who is internally immersed in remembrance of the divine name (*Nam*), submits to the will of God, and continually reads and listens to the true Guru of the Word may receive divine knowledge, virtues, and qualities, and eventually pursue liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Although Sikhs do make an epistemological distinction between the Word of God (*shabad*) and the utterances of human messengers (*gurbani*) the ontological difference remains more subtle and involves merely a process of progression of divine words, from subtle to material form, which can be perceived with the human senses. The words and teaching of Guru Nanak and the following Gurus, transmitted in sound through “the mouth of the Guru” (*Gurmukhi*) and later committed to writing, emanated from the *shabad* and shared the same divine essence. The Guru Granth Sahib is therefore believed to enshrine the economy and agency of the *Shabad-Guru* – the divine Word which descended to mankind through the personal voices of human messengers.

Sikhs communicating in an English vernacular frequently make use of the theological term “revelation” when they describe the divine intervention through Guru Nanak. The Sikh understanding of this foreign term engenders a dynamic process of hearing and speaking – a discourse through which the formless God in sound discloses words and knowledge to Guru Nanak without any secondary means. Revelation in the Sikh understanding is thus an experience of truth through a dialogue revelation, or a phonetic experience that is mystically and intuitively imparted to the Guru by the will of God. Divine words are believed to have descended to Nanak who was set in an immediate state of meditation and started to sing. In the exegetical tradition of the Sikhs, presented and represented by contemporary Sikh scholars, passages from the Guru Granth Sahib are often cited to support the argument that Guru

Nanak perceived himself as a messenger of celestial words.<sup>246</sup> The narrative tradition of *janam-sakhis*, recorded from the seventeenth century and onwards, came to dress the hymns of Nanak in biographical prose stories on the life and deeds of the first Guru. Narrators belonging to the *Puratan Janam-sakhi* tradition took especially the notion of direct revelation seriously, embroidering the narrative scenery of how Nanak in his twenties disappeared in the river Bein for three days. In the meantime he was gathered into a divine presence to experience a direct and aural revelation of the formless God: Nanak heard the voice of God and was given a celestial bowl with immortal nectar (*amrit*) of the divine name to drink. By ingesting the godly name he was invested to the office of the guru for the world and received a robe of honour from the divine court that confirmed and sanctified the bestowal of spiritual authority.<sup>247</sup> The story clearly emphasizes that Nanak's identity was a missioned being, already selected by God, and not brought into a divine presence to become enlightened. After this experience Nanak sets out on extensive travels accompanied by his Muslim musician friend Mardana to refine and spread his message. Along the way into distant countries the *janam-sakhi* literature relates a continuing divine disclosure: incessantly Nanak asks Mardana to tune his *Rabab* – the bowed-string instrument “speaking” the language of a dervish – and immersed in meditation the Guru generates *shabads* by singing the glory of God.<sup>248</sup> It is not Nanak himself who speaks, but the words of divine origin are mystically and aesthetically mediated through his mind and body to the sound of a celestial music.

When local Sikhs in Varanasi say that the Gurus' hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib are “speech from the sky” (*akash bani*) or “words from God” (*dhur ki bani*), they thus appeal to fundamental Sikh beliefs and a tradition which claims that divine words of ultimate truth was conferred to Guru Nanak by God to be communicated to the world. The nature of this revelation is believed to be both private and public, in the sense that God exclusively graced Nanak to disseminate a divine message and establish a religious institution within which people could be brought to a higher level of understanding through *gurbani*, or the Guru's utterances. Believing Sikhs

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<sup>246</sup> One oft-quoted line to support the notion of Guru Nanak as a mediator in a godly revelation is: “O Lalo, as the Word of the Lord comes to me, so do I express it” (GGS: 722).

<sup>247</sup> The tenth chapter of *Puratan Janam-sakhi* named *Bein Pravesh*, “entry into the river Bein”, tells about Nanak's experiences in the divine court (See Bhai Vir Singh 1999(1926): 40 – 43, and the analysis of Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh 1992).

<sup>248</sup> In the fifteenth and sixteenth century the *Rabab* was a significant instrument of Sufi *sama*, attributed mystical values, and in some Sufi orders considered to speak as a dervish (Binbas 2001: 73). The *janam-sakhis* communicates similar ideas about the *Rabab* as an instrument producing divine sounds. In the popular *Balevali janam-sakhi* for instance, Mardana went to collect a *Rabab* from the musician Farinda in Akazpur. Farinda told Mardana that the *Rabab* was divine and forbade Mardana to play the instrument in front of anyone but Nanak. In absence of the Guru, Mardana just touched the strings, from which a divine sound was heard. When Mardana placed the *Rabab* in front of Nanak and was asked to play, the strings started to sound by themselves and tuning the words “You are *Nirankar*, Nanak is Yours.” At the sound of the new *Rabab* Nanak went into meditation for two days and nights (Kirpal Singh 1990: 246 – 248).

would argue that the foundation of a Sikh community at Kartarpur (Punjab) at the end of Nanak's travels and his establishment of a guru lineage by appointing his devoted disciples Bhai Lehna (later renamed to Guru Angad) to be the following successor were intentional efforts of the Guru to implement a much broader divine plan of deliverance in a concrete moment of history when dharma was lost and Muslim rulers impaired the country.

That God spoke to humans through the words of Guru Nanak and the following Gurus has paved the way for theological and mythological beliefs related to the person who occupied the post of guru and his special relationship to God. In the various *janam-sakhis* the persona of Nanak is represented in many diverse ways; Nanak is a householder, a meditating ascetic, sometimes likened to the divine, and a charismatic Guru, who mystically draws people to his presence. Contemporary Sikhs similarly express a variety of views on the first Guru depending upon their personal beliefs and religious background. The far most common stance among my interlocutors in Varanasi often starts out from a firm monotheistic belief in a formless and almighty God without attributes to downplay the divine nature of Nanak. This viewpoint presents two different interpretations to the identity of the Guru: the first one perceives Nanak as an ordinary human who is gifted with supernatural knowledge from birth and owing to a mystical experience become liberated to accumulate no further karma. The second and more popular explanation, on the other hand, asserts that Nanak was already an enlightened human being who entered the world in obedience to God's command to deliver a divine message at a time when a personal guru was necessary for human salvation.<sup>249</sup> According to the former view the birth of Nanak was subject to the laws of karma, while the latter opinion presumes a non-karmic reincarnation consistent with a prior plan of God. Common for both, however, is that Guru Nanak is an enlightened human being who during his lifetime operates within a close relationship to God that is based on pure love and devotion. He is the humble disciple (*sikh*) or slave (*das*), who by the choice of God is granted direct access to divine knowledge (*gian*) and authority to reveal this knowledge to the world. A local *granthi* in Varanasi voiced this idea as follows:

G: The Gurus were sent by God. God sent them to this world to bring people on the right path and stop torture... But God is on the first place. God should be worshipped first. The Gurus will always come and go. He will die one day and be gone. But God is eternal. God runs everything and everyone.

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<sup>249</sup> The idea of a non-karmic birth of an enlightened soul is in no way unique for origin beliefs connected with the Guru. In popular religion people believe that souls residing in a celestial court can take human birth if God consents to bless barren couples with a child. The child sent to earth on God's command is considered to belong to the court of God and not the family in which it is born, since it took birth from a divine intervention and not from the result of karma and natural conception.

K: So were the Sikh Gurus of divine nature or were they human?

G: They were humans like you and me, but they were always in meditation (*simran*), doing worship to God. God saw that they were good people and therefore sent them to earth to bring people on the righteous path. God sent them. They came by a command (*Hukam*) of God.

These two foundational premises of being admitted divine knowledge and permitted to speak are by no means restricted to the person of the Guru, but can be granted to anyone who receives the divine grace and reaches the same stage of spiritual perfection. That there will be *sants*, *bhakts* and other saintly persons who have mystical experiences similar to that of Nanak is acknowledged, although generally alleged that God alone knows their identity and only a few will be allowed to teach the world. The “revelation” attainable for ordinary people is primarily to discover and disclose the knowledge of God through the medium of *gurbani*. Through the Guru of *gurbani* ordinary humans may attain a liberated state, or become a *jivan mukt*, while retaining a bodily and worldly existence and continue living until the karma is exhausted at the time of death.

Despite the belief that Nanak’s mission was divinely instigated and sanctioned, these notions keenly stress the Guru’s human quality. A middle-aged woman expressed this idea in the following way:

Guru Nanak Dev ji never called himself God. He said the Word (*bani*) is the true Guru. He was an “informer” of God and came to tell us about God. Guru Nanak Dev ji said the teaching I am giving is not mine, the words I am giving you is not mine. It is the words of God. He was the medium to give us that.

The real Guru was from the beginning *gurbani*, and consequently the personal guru was not supposed to be object of worship like a deity, but highly respected as the enlightened preceptor who rendered a revelation possible and thereby opened a door to the path of liberation. To humanize Nanak, several of my interlocutors accentuated the significance of his own efforts to reach the status of a Guru: Nanak obeyed the commands of God and by relentless immersion in meditation and remembrance of the divine name he was rewarded a high position in the celestial court. What differentiated the spiritual endeavour of the Guru from ordinary people was his ceaseless devotion to God. “When we are trying to reach God we will always face a lot of obstacles, but Guru Nanak Dev ji was never affected by anything. He always continued to praise God”, a woman in her fifties compared practices of the Sikhs with those of the Guru. Frequently my respondents quoted a popular verse in *Bachitra Natak* attributed to the tenth Guru to prove that all the Sikh Gurus – from Nanak to Gobind Singh – considered themselves merely as servants of God and condemned any instance of deification:

For this reason the Lord sent me and I was born in this world.  
 Whatever the Lord said, I am repeating the same unto you.  
 I do not bear enmity with anyone (31).  
 Whosoever shall call me the Lord, shall fall into hell  
 Consider me as His servant and do not think of any difference between  
 me and the Lord (32).<sup>250</sup>

Even though many local people maintain that it is a misdemeanour to liken the Guru to God, the distinction between the messenger and the message is sometimes hard to separate. As a middle-aged man said, “We will still call the Guru God (*parameshwar*) and then accept to go to hell, because he has given a lot to us.” Individuals who are graced with divine knowledge and dedicate their whole life to devotional practices directed to God will receive divine power. As a true disciple of God, the guru is believed to internalize and manifest divine knowledge in his own human soul and body to become a god-like being. Although God and guru continue to be two different conceptual categories, the ontological nature of the two merges when the guru is imbued with divine qualities.

In everyday speech Sikhs frequently suffix the name of Nanak and other Gurus with the epithet *dev*, or “god”, to indicate their high spiritual status. More mythologically elaborated notions on the persona of Nanak voiced by a slightly fewer number of interlocutors will take the glorification of the Guru a step further to claim that Nanak was indeed God manifested, an incarnation of God in the dark age of *kaliyug*. By adopting material and structures from mythologies of the surrounding culture this approach apotheosizes Nanak to the status of a Vaishnava avatar within the Hindu pantheon and identifies the Sikh Gurus with the deity Ram in the Ramayana story. Guru Nanak is incorporated in the larger Hindu cosmological design of the classical concept of four progressive ages of the creation – *satyug*, *tretayug*, *dvaparyug* and *kaliyug* – in each of which lord Vishnu manifests himself through avatars to provide spiritual guidance and remedy for humans. A young Sikh man in Varanasi explained:

God and Guru is the same. In *satyug* came Hari, in *tretayug* Ram ji, in *dvaparyug* Krishna ji, and in *kaliyug* Guru Nanak Dev ji. All are one, but they incarnate in different forms. The Guru ji is an incarnation of God.<sup>251</sup>

Like the common tendency in Hindu mythology to merge two or more deities into one and envisage the same God holding several attributes in different eras, the avatar of Nanak is presented as the last avatar in the degenerated age of *kaliyug*. “God took

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<sup>250</sup> Kohli 2003: 133.

<sup>251</sup> This mythological interpretation of Guru Nanak finds references in the writing of the bard Kal, included in Guru Granth Sahib, who writes that God will be recognized as Guru Nanak, Angad and Amardas in the age of *kaliyug* (GGS: 1390).

birth in the form of Guru Nanak Dev ji, but Guru Gobind Singh ji said there will be no other incarnation after him”, a young woman said. In a fashion similar to the Puranic tradition the Sikh Gurus are provided with elaborated mytho-genealogical charts that connect them with Lav and Kush, the two sons of the deity couple Ram and Sita.<sup>252</sup> A popular legend narrates how Lav inherited Ram’s kingdom in Lahore after a war over the succession and became known as Sodhi. His brother Kush escaped to Varanasi to study the Veda books and was therefore called Bedi. Later on Kush returned as a hermit in the court of Lav to predestine the birth of a future Sikh dynasty: the Bedi clan would be born under the name of Nanak and all the Gurus from the forth Guru in succession would be descendants of the Sodhi clan. Kush and Lav were thus ancestors of the two clans to which all the Sikhs Gurus belonged. Kinship relations that are crucial to the social life have modelled genealogical narratives about the Gurus’ origin and relationship to popular divinities in the Hindu mythology.

To substantiate the ancestral bond between Nanak and Ram, the folk lore stores bundles of legends that aim to prove a similarity between the two incarnations. The loyalty of the monkey god Hanuman, Ram’s most devout follower, often makes the plot of these stories. A Sikh woman in her fifties related the outline of one story she liked:

Once when Hanuman ji was walking in the nectar hours he heard the sound of wooden sandals. It was Guru Nanak Dev ji. Guru Nanak Dev ji told Hanuman ji:  
 - Open your eyes and just look at me, look who came for you.  
 But Hanuman ji said:  
 - I open my eyes only to see Ram, no one else.  
 Then Guru Nanak Dev ji said:  
 - Open you eyes – Ram came!  
 Then Hanuman ji looked up and saw Ram standing before him. Guru Nanak Dev ji changed into the form of Ram. From that time Hanuman ji started to believe in Guru Nanak dev ji. He said:  
 - You are Ram, you are Govind.

Other popular anecdotes will tell how the Sikh Gurus, on command of God, gave auspicious sight (*darshan*) of Ram to pious Hindus by their own physical appearances; Vaishnava followers saw the incarnation of Ram by gazing at the Sikh Gurus. Popular mythologies that are locally retold provide the material and prototypes for stories about the Gurus situated in a larger cosmological context.

Although it is evident that interlocutors appealing to the avatar theory are strongly influenced by the local culture of Varanasi, the mythologized notion of

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<sup>252</sup> The birth of the two sons of Ram is portrayed in *Lavkush Khand*, included as appendix to contemporary versions of Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*.

Nanak cannot be reduced to contemporary contextual influences, but finds support in historical and modern Sikh texts which have gained various degree of acceptance.<sup>253</sup> That Nanak is as an embodiment of God with kinship ties to the avatar of Vishnu is not necessarily perceived contradictory to beliefs in a formless God and the human nature of the Guru, since avatars are still subordinate to God and like humans subjected to birth and death. Whether individuals will perceive the first Guru as an ordinary human graced with knowledge, an enlightened preceptor working on God's command, or an avatar of Vishnu may, on the other hand, determine the ways by which people think and speak of Guru Granth Sahib. An elderly Sikh man said "Guru Granth Sahib ji is not only a text for us but it is our God (*bhagwan*) and our favored deity (*istdev*)". Thus, if the human Gurus are perceived as incarnations of God then the Sikh scripture is likely to share the apotheosized status, since the text is empowered by the same spiritual authority and power as its human predecessors.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GURUS

It is a well-known fact within the Sikh tradition that Guru Nanak instituted a succession line of Gurus in the late 1530s by nominating his devout disciple Lehna to the *gaddi*, or the "seat" of temporal and spiritual authority. Instead of appointing any of his two sons as successor, Nanak chose an obedient follower as the appropriate Guru to lead the community after him. The nomination of Lehna did not only ensure a continuation of the office which Nanak had established at Kartarpur but also marked out that spiritual merits, rather than kinship ties, should serve as the sole criterion for selection of a succeeding Guru.<sup>254</sup> Guru Nanak renamed Lehna Angad (in Punjabi "my limb") to indicate a unity between the Guru and his successor. Based on this important event in history, the dominant Sikh theory of guruship presupposes a close spiritual relationship which existed between ten graced men who occupied the Guru's post. The ancient metaphor of the Guru as the embodiment of a divine "light" (*jot*) that illuminates the world and is passed on from one preceptor to another is often employed to illustrate this relationship. An oft-quoted textual reference to support the theory of spiritual transmission is found in a sixteenth century verse of Bhai Gurdas, which suggests that Nanak's installation of Angad was a mystical event:

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<sup>253</sup> The late seventeenth century poem *Bachitra Natak*, or "The Wondrous Drama" ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh, relates the story of the Sodhi clan and its connection to the Sikh Gurus. From a mythological framework guru Gobind Singh describes his own history in terms of a divine plan to reveal God by proclaiming a community and spreading faith. For an English translation of the composition, see Kohli 2003. Another popularized version of the mytho-genealogical link between the Sikh Gurus and the deity couple Ram and Sita is found the life-story of Baba Vadbhag Singh (See Chapter 4).

<sup>254</sup> Grewal 1999: 41. From the third Guru, Amardas, the succession line of Gurus came to stay within the family.



During his life time he waved the canopy of the Guru's seat on the head of Lahina (Guru Angad) and merged his own light onto him. Guru Nanak now transformed himself. This mystery is incomprehensible for anybody that awe-inspiring (Nanak) accomplished a wonderful task. He converted (his body) into a new form.<sup>255</sup>

From a religious standpoint the image of Nanak's "light" merging in that of Angad signifies the transfer of spiritual power to the successor. The guruhood was conferred on the disciple only when he was invested with the divine radiance which Nanak brought into the world. The tradition relates that the expression of this mystical shift of authority assumed ritual forms in the Sikh court.

It is clear from the above quoted verse that Guru Nanak is considered responsible for both the nomination and formal installation of Guru Angad by placing a canopy above his seat and thereby making himself a disciple to the new Guru. Following this model it was the incumbent Sikh Guru who appointed an heir before vacancy occurred. The nomination of a successor remained exclusively in the hands of the reigning Guru while the formal investment ceremony could be performed by the Guru or his representatives. From the time of the third Guru up to the sixth Guru the formal installation was assisted by Baba Buddha, a contemporary disciple appointed as the first *granthi* at Harimandir Sahib. During a standard ceremony the Guru in office would indicate his successor by requesting him to occupy the Guru's seat, a low stool (*manji* or *chawki*) bedecked with a royal canopy which represented the place of authority and teaching. To publicly affirm the election the becoming Guru would then be offered symbols, which were similar to coronations of royalties and aimed to demonstrate the Guru's spiritual and political authority and simultaneously changed the status of the disciple.<sup>256</sup> The Guru presented his nominee with an offering of sacred food and placed five paisa coins and a coconut in front him. The tradition maintains that this ritual act was performed with respect to the successor by all the Gurus, with exception of Arjan, Guru Har Krishan and Guru Tegh Bahadur. What ritual instruments were used for the formal investiture remains uncertain, although a traditional account would assert that the Guru handed over two objects to his successor: a *pothi* (a book or volume) with religious compositions and a *seli* or woollen cord which was a Sufi insignia of renunciation.<sup>257</sup> Analogous to the cultural custom of giving a turban to the male chief mourner at the death of his father to symbolize the succession of paternal authority (*dastar bandhi*), the withdrawing Guru might have tied a turban on the head of his successor. At least in theory these symbols should be imposed by the Guru, or some of his representative, who conferred the

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<sup>255</sup> *Var* 1:45, translation by Jodh Singh 1998: 75. In the *Guru Granth Sahib* the courtly bards Satta and Balwand similarly write that the Gurus shared the same divine light and only changed bodies (GGS: 699).

<sup>256</sup> See Bell 1997: 83ff.

<sup>257</sup> The seventeenth century *Valaitvali Janam-sakhi* informs that Guru Angad was ceremonially given a *pothi* when he ascended to the office of the Guru (Kirpal Singh 1990: 57).

sovereignty which the items symbolized. To confirm the transfer of authority Baba Buddha decorated the forehead of the new Guru with a *tilak* mark as a symbol of blessing. In a humble act of submission the former Guru would prostrate (*matha tekna*) at the feet of his successor and ask his own family and followers to do the same.<sup>258</sup> By paying homage to the newly installed Guru the preceding Guru became a disciple himself.

As a traditional account would continue, the political climate after the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606 induced his son Hargobind to choose two swords, *piri* and *miri*, instead of a woollen cord as proper insignia of the future Guru. *Piri* would represent the Guru's spiritual power, while *miri* signified his extended worldly role and right to protect religion. The two swords reflected new political conditions facing the Sikh community when the personal Guru needed to be fully armed. Another significant change at the investiture of Guru Hargobind was the Guru's decision to expand his own authority to the recently compiled Sikh scripture. Instead of seating himself on the traditional stool of spiritual authority, Guru Hargobind instructed Baba Buddha to bestow the seat to the scripture and bowed himself before the book.<sup>259</sup> By ritual means the Sikh Gurus mobilized a parallel authority of the book, and this development reached its peak when Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 transferred the guruship to the Sikh scripture which then became Guru Granth Sahib.

Embedded in the notion of a spiritual relationship between the Sikh Gurus is the strong emphasis on doctrinal agreement between all the Gurus, from Nanak to Gobind Singh. The evidence for this unity is said to be found in the form and content of the Gurus' compositions, as well as the compilation process of the scripture. The Gurus taught in their individual styles, introduced organizational innovations, and adjusted their instructions to contemporary social and political conditions, but their teaching or path towards liberation remained unchanged. When Guru Arjan compiled the Sikh scripture in the beginning of seventeenth century he incorporated hymns of the first five Gurus, including his own compositions, and religious poetry of bards and saints which displayed ideological unanimity. The hymns to be included in the scriptural corpus had to comply with the teaching of the Gurus. The device of using the formula *Mahala*, in place of their individual names, to denote nearly all the hymns of the Gurus support the belief in a uniform identity and teaching of the Gurus.<sup>260</sup> The hymns of Nanak are preceded by the numerical form *Mahala* 1, those of Angad by *Mahala* 2, and so on. Correspondingly, the use of the typical expression

<sup>258</sup> See for example the account of Guru Amardas and Guru Ramdas installation in *Suraj Prakash* (Gian Singh 2004: 171, 206). References to the practice of decorating the Guru with *tilak* and placing an umbrella over his head are also found in the Sikh scripture (See GGS: 966).

<sup>259</sup> Gian Singh 2004: 288.

<sup>260</sup> The origin and meaning of the word *mahala* is obscure. Scholars will argue it is derived from the Arabic word *mahal*, which signifies "house", "abode" and figuratively connotes the body and the mental state of humans. Another interpretation would suggest that the word *mahala* originates from the Sanskrit *mahila*, literally meaning "women" or "wife", since the Sikh Gurus metaphorically presented themselves as the beloved wives of God (See e.g. Nanda 1998).

“Nanak says” within individual hymns, whether the composer is Nanak or some of the other Gurus, sustains this idea.

In addition to the evidence within the text, local Sikhs in Varanasi would support the theory of ideological consensus on two different interpretations of the spiritual relationship between Nanak and the following Gurus. The first version would situate Nanak in a unique position in relation to his successors. Since Nanak claimed to have had direct access to a transcendent source and did not follow any human teacher himself, he is perceived to be the personal Guru for nine subsequent leaders. The communication between God and the nine following Gurus went through the words and teaching of Nanak, from which they obtained spiritual authority and were enabled to comprehend and express divine knowledge. “Guru Nanak Dev ji was not taught by any teacher. He was god-gifted. But the other Gurus learnt from him and followed a tradition,” an elderly Sikh man expressed this view. That Nanak continued to occupy a sovereign position does not mean that Sikhs supporting this view give less importance to the later Gurus. The traditional guru-disciple relationship presumes the disciple is fostered to engage in disciplinary worship and perform regular service to the Guru in order to gradually assimilate a teaching to such an extent that the Guru’s knowledge will be transmitted to him or her. Only when the disciple has advanced to spiritual maturity and shows readiness can he be inducted to the *gaddi* and become a Guru. In line with this fundamental idea, the Sikh Gurus after Nanak were nominated to the office after having served the incumbent Guru as humble and obedient disciples. Except for Guru Angad, who pursued knowledge directly from the person of Nanak, each of them obtained their spiritual authority and power from the Guru in office who had embodied the teaching of Nanak.

The second and more widely accepted interpretation emphatically stresses the existence of a continued direct revelation through divinely inspired utterances of all the Sikh Gurus. Like Nanak the subsequent Gurus were preordained minstrels of God and graced with power to hear and understand the voice of God.<sup>261</sup> To elucidate the ideas underlying this position an elderly Sikh man in Varanasi narrated the story of Guru Har Krishan, who was only six years old when he received the title as Guru in 1661 from his father Har Rai. The young Guru was forced to work a miracle to persuade a group of sceptical Brahmins that “he was having knowledge of God (*brahm gian*) and the same light (*jot*) of Nanak” despite his age. The boy did not inhabit a teaching by serving the Guru as a disciple, but possessed supernatural knowledge already from birth. When appointed to the office of Guru he became an embodiment of the “light” flowing from Nanak.

In colloquial speech it is common to title all the human Gurus by the phrase *dason patshahion ke sarup*, “the form of ten kings”, while the individual Guru is referred to as *jagadi jot*, meaning the “manifest light”, and sometimes *jot rup*, or “the

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<sup>261</sup> Apologetic scholars frequently use textual references in the Guru Granth Sahib to prove the revelatory nature of the writings of Gurus following Nanak. See for example the hymns of Guru Amardas (GGS: 515), Guru Ramdas (GGS: 308), and Guru Arjan (GGS: 734, 763).

bodily form/shape of the light’’.<sup>262</sup> These designations, constructed on regal and religious images, serve to glorify the spiritual and temporal authority of the human Guru and accentuate a significant distinction that is made between the form (*rup, sarup*) of the Guru’s human body and the light (*jot*), which his body enshrined. Like ordinary humans the physical body of the Sikh Guru was perishable, subjected to birth and death, and operated as provisional “clothing” to conceal the divine illumination of the Guru. When a nominee ascended to the guru-post his body was mystically endowed with a spiritual composition similar to his predecessor. Although the Punjabi word *jot* literally means “light” and bears the connotations “spirit” and “soul”, the word has come to signify two indivisible aspects related to the Sikh Guru’s identity and the notion of spiritual transmission. Firstly, the human Guru in office was bestowed the agency of a personal Guru, preordained by God and initially conferred to Guru Nanak, which provides authority to reveal and interpret *gurbani* – the divine words and knowledge flowing from the Guru’s mouth- to the community and the world. Secondly, the active agency of the word which is situated and speaks through human spokesmen is the true Guru – the *shabad* Guru – which emanates from a divine source and discloses itself to the world. The formal installation of a human Guru is therefore understood to be a process by which the individual candidate is empowered with the spirit and agency of the Guru. All the Sikh Gurus are consequently perceived as intra-spiritual, that is, ten living beings shared the same spirit and continued the process of illumination as they were chosen and imputed formative agency of the Guru. The relationships that existed between the human Gurus in the Sikh tradition thus presume spiritual continuity and corporeal diversity: the same spirit inhabited all of them, while the bodily manifestations posited transformability as the spirit was passed on to ten different human shapes. The real metamorphosis of the Guru at the time of an installation was merely a physical transformation, while the spiritual components wield homogenization. Since the Guru Granth Sahib inherited the office of the Guru, the ways by which contemporary Sikhs perceive the relationship between the human Gurus also have implications for how they conceptualize and behave towards the scripture.

#### HISTORY OF THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

When my interlocutors in Varanasi were requested to identify historical developments which they personally considered important to the Sikh religion, there were two events that stood out markedly in their responses: the compilation of the Sikh scripture by Guru Arjan in 1604 and Guru Gobind Singh’s elevation of the book to the office of the Guru in 1708.<sup>263</sup> Considering that the Guru Granth Sahib stands in the centre of contemporary worship and serves as the primary source for Sikh beliefs and values, the historical preference was not surprising. Seen from another angle, the

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<sup>262</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 364.

<sup>263</sup> Considered to be an equally important historical event was the creation of *Khalsa* in 1699.

answers are indicative of the extent to which normative historiography, communicated through literature and oral expositions, plays a significant role for religious identities and self-representations in a local community. Of all persons and happenings that took place during an era comprising more than five hundred years, it is the episodes explaining the origin and succession of the Guru Granth Sahib that are deemed momentous events. Unlike the approaches to history by modern scholarship, which characteristically view history as evolving processes from the perspective of contextual influences and change, the perception of history among local Sikhs is (similar to narratives in the *janam-sakhi* tradition) reduced to a few particular episodes. These episodes constitute a structure of events with a clear “agent-centric” perspective, that is, display centrality on the deeds of the Sikh Gurus as active agents and creators of history. Only the human Gurus had authority to initiate major changes in the Sikh tradition and gave orders which contemporary Sikhs are expected to obey and follow. While the first event explains the origin and compilation of the Sikh scripture, represented as a *patient* in relation to the human Gurus – the written text is compiled, protected and treasured by the Gurus – the second event relates to the transfer of authority that brought *gurbani* to the centre as the *agent* embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib. The scripture became the personal Guru, ascribed capacities to continue a revelation and cause action in the world. Together the two episodes constitute a meaningful history which discursively explain and legitimize the occasions by which the scripture became and continues to be the Guru of the Sikhs.

Sikh historiography has characteristically been occupied with confirming an early textual authority in the Sikh tradition and has developed different theories on the motives which the Gurus might have had for committing their compositions to writing and compiling a scripture. References to the scripture itself are often quoted or rephrased to confirm that the Sikh Gurus regarded manuscripts with sacred hymns as an abode of the divine,<sup>264</sup> and the act of inscribing sacred words was a devotional act that people should engage in.<sup>265</sup> The existence of an early manuscript culture suggests the Gurus venerated the written word and recognized the social importance of committing their utterances to writing, especially in a culture where other religious communities consolidated around defined scripts. The hagiographical literature on Guru Nanak and the writings of Bhai Gurdas assert that the first Guru was carrying a *pothi* which he presumably used for recording his sacred poetry and collecting devotional hymns by like-minded others during his extensive travels.<sup>266</sup> Guru Nanak is said to have ensured the preservation of his compositions in manuscripts which came to be known as *Harshahi pothi* (1530). By the time of the third Guru Amar Das the divinely inspired poetry of the first three Gurus was collected in the *Goindwal pothis* (1570).<sup>267</sup> When the fifth Guru Arjan, in beginning of the seventeenth

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<sup>264</sup> See e.g. GGS: 1226.

<sup>265</sup> See e.g. GGS: 16, 930.

<sup>266</sup> References are found in the *Puratan Janam Sakhi* and the *Varan* of Bhai Gurdas.

<sup>267</sup> For an extensive analysis of the different manuscripts, consult Mann 2001: 32 – 50.

century, decided to prepare the compilation of the Sikh scripture, which was to be known as the *Kartarpur pothi* (1604), he is said to have collected manuscripts and devotional poetry composed by his predecessors as well as bards in the Sikh court and Hindu and Muslims saint poets from different locations. Although several debates about the status of the *Kartarpur pothi* have surfaced scholarly discussions in the twentieth century,<sup>268</sup> local Sikhs generally adhere to the traditional view which accepts this manuscript as the first compilation of the Sikh scripture and gives Guru Arjan full credit for the compilation process. The completion of scriptural corpus in 1604 is considered to be one of the most memorable events in Sikh history.

The underlying motives and triggering reasons for Guru Arjan's decision to prepare a corpus with sacred poetry of the Sikh Gurus, with exception of the hymns ascribed to Guru Tegh Bahadur, will be given many explanations by practicing Sikhs. Popular interpretations, which traditional Sikh historiography often return to, narrate the rivalry over the succession to the office of the Guru and the threat of *kacchi bani*, or "half-baked" or "unripe" utterances, that is, compositions that claim to be authentic devotional poetry created in the spirit of Guru Nanak but which in reality were false compositions composed by rival family members to the Sikh Gurus. A popular tradition, for instance, tells that Guru Arjan engaged himself with urgency in the compilation work after he had heard hymns by his nephew Meharvan being sung by his disciples as if it was authentic *gurbani*.<sup>269</sup> Facing the threat of having divinely inspired words smeared with false compositions and deviating doctrines it became important to collect and sanction the genuine words of the Gurus. The only person in authority to accomplish this task was the divinely appointed messenger himself – the Guru. To contemporary Sikhs this interpretation of the Guru's motives often functions like a verification of the authentic *gurbani* status of all words included in the scripture. Other explanations may point to the need to settle guidelines for the Sikhs and mark out the higher authority of words and teaching emanating from Guru, rather than the Guru's person and body that would eventually perish. Once the hymns of the Gurus and other like-minded were accessible in writing the sacred scripture was to become the permanent locus of a continued revelation and the written words mediators of divine truths.

The oft-quoted and paraphrased *Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi* ("The Splendour of the Sixth Master"), a nineteenth century text attributed to Sohan Kavi, relates how Guru Arjan procured the *Goindwal pothis* in Goindwal and brought the manuscripts in

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<sup>268</sup> See Mann 2001: 59 – 68.

<sup>269</sup> Textual reference to this tradition is found in eighteenth century work *Bansavalinama Dasan Patishahian ka* (Genealogy of the Ten Masters) by Kesar Singh Chhibar. In Sikh historiography rivalry over succession to the office of the Guru begun when Guru Ram Das nominated his youngest son Arjan to successor instead of his elder son Prithi Chand. In more than one way did Prithi Chand try to outdo Guru Arjan. The tradition accounts that Prithi Chand and his son Meharvan began a parallel line of Gurus and compiled their own manuscript with devotional hymns. Bhai Gurdas gave Prithi Chand and his successors the nickname *Minas*, meaning "wicked", and Sikhs were requested to have no association with them.

procession to Amritsar. To honor the *pothis* Guru Arjan placed the texts on a palanquin decorated with precious stones that was bore by devotees, while the Guru himself marched behind barefoot accompanied by musicians and devotees singing sacred hymns. Hargobind, the youngest son of Guru Arjan, is said to have showered petals in front of the manuscripts. At Amritsar the Guru pitched a camp and started the editing work on the Sikh scripture. Beside him was his faithful disciple and scribe Bhai Gurdas. While the Guru selected and dictated the material for inclusion in a scriptural corpus, Bhai Gurdas penned the devotional poetry in Gurmukhi script. *Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi* continues to narrate the celebration of the completion of the scripture and the ceremonial installation of it at the newly constructed Harimandir Sahib in 1604. Sikhs came in large numbers to venerate the new sacred book. Guru Arjan selected his devout disciple Baba Buddha to be the first custodian of the scripture. In a solemnized procession Baba Buddha carried the text on his head, while Guru Arjan walked behind waving a whisk over it. The scripture was installed in the centre of the new temple and Baba Buddha opened the folio to obtain the first *Hukam*, the divine command. After *Kirtan Sohila* had been recited at night, the scripture was draped in robes and carried to a secluded room (*kothari*) which Guru Arjan had built. During the night Guru Arjan was sleeping on the ground beside the text.<sup>270</sup>

The importance of this textual reference for contemporary Sikhs lies in the stipulation of conducts towards the scriptures by Guru Arjan himself. In words and deeds the Guru set the norms for a future ritual ministration of the scripture that would cast the text like a worldly sovereign and confirm its spiritual authority. The daily liturgies that Sikhs perform in Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar and gurdwaras at other locations embody the memory of this historical event as they imitate or reproduce archetypal actions that were sanctioned by the Guru Arjan. The reference provides a paradigmatic textual model for the treatment of Guru Granth Sahib.

The second significant event in Sikh history, according to local people, was the elevation of the Sikh scripture to the office of the Guru. A traditional account relates how the tenth Guru Gobind Singh in the beginning of the eighteenth century compiled the *Adi Granth*, literally “the original book”, by adding hymns composed by his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, into the scriptural corpus of the *Kartarpur pothi*.<sup>271</sup> Gobind Singh declared that the newly compiled text was to be forever closed with no more hymns incorporated. The copies of the scripture went by the name *Damdama bir* as they were prepared by scribes under the Guru’s supervision at Damdama Sahib (Bhatinda) in the Punjab. It is popularly believed that the Sikh scripture has remained unchanged ever since the final version was completed.

At his deathbed in 1708 Guru Gobind Singh declared the scripture to be the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, which hereafter was to be called the *Guru Granth*, added

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<sup>270</sup> Fauja Singh 1990: 45 – 50.

<sup>271</sup> Mann provides a deviant interpretation of this traditional account and locates the compilation and canonization of the *Adi Granth* to the 1680s. He bases this argument on the existence of manuscripts from this decade which incorporate the compositions of Guru Tegh Bahadur (Mann 2001: 83 – 84).

with a suffix of reverence (*Sahib ji*). The Guru is said to have placed a coconut and five coins in front of the scripture, he paid obeisance to the text, and then ordered his disciples to venerate and believe in the scripture as their Guru.<sup>272</sup> By the ritual installation of scripture and the verbal decree by Gobind Singh the canonized scripture succeeded to a human succession line and was permanently invested the same spiritual authority and agency of the Guru traditionally endowed to human preceptors.

When speculating about Guru Gobind Singh's decision to transfer the spiritual authority to the scripture, local Sikhs will firstly consider the immediate historical circumstances and mention the personal sacrifices of the Guru. Gobind Singh died without a legitimate heir to continue the line of human Gurus. His two elder sons had been killed in the battle of Chamkaur and the two younger sons had been captured and executed by Vazir Khan at Sirhind. A succession line of human Gurus would cause disputes about the legitimate successor and could not have continued forever. By conferring the spiritual authority upon the book, on the other hand, the Guru remained ever-present and accessible to the Sikhs independent of historical circumstances. The community would not stand and fall with the life and death of a mortal human Guru in a lineage that could be easily disrupted. Instead, the divine words and teaching became accessible via the revelation through a text that was made resistant to external threats against the tradition and community. A middle-aged Sikh man in Varanasi said: "After Guru Gobind Singh ji we do not have to go around looking for the Guru, we just go to the Guru Granth Sahib ji, take a *Hukam* and follow that." From 1708 on the disciple who wants to see the Guru needs only to take the visual sight of the Guru Granth Sahib and the one who wishes to hear the Guru needs only read and reflect upon words and teaching in the scripture.

What seemed to be of even more concern to my interlocutors was the perceived fact that Gobind Singh had declared an order which the Sikhs in all times are obliged to follow. The Guru must have had good reasons for taking such a radical step to proclaim the scripture his successor which/who would embody the agency and guidance of the Guru. An elderly Sikh man explained that the Sikh people have by their traditional occupations in the military and police services come to know the importance of an order given by a superior. Just like soldiers do not question the motivations and reasons behind orders of their commanders, acknowledgment of and obedience to Gobind Singh's order is more important to the Sikhs than speculations about the underlying reasons that lead up to his decision.

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<sup>272</sup> A textual reference to this event is found in the popular *Suraj Prakash* by Bhai Santokh Singh (Gian Singh 2004: 577).



## IMPLICATIONS OF SCRIPTURAL SUCCESSION

Given the historical background of the canonization and succession of the Guru Granth Sahib to the office of the Guru, what are consequences of having scripture invested authority that traditionally was endowed to Gurus in human form? The simplest answer to this question among locals would read “no more will a person who has a human body be the Guru”, as one interlocutor confirmed the eternal authority of the scripture. Considering the notion of a spiritual relationship between the human Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib is believed to have been empowered with the same intra-spirit of the agentive Guru and continues to embody a collective spirit of all the historical Gurus. Frequently Sikhs will say that Guru Granth Sahib is the *sarup*, or the assumed “form, shape, configuration, appearance” of ten Gurus,<sup>273</sup> meaning that the total knowledge and power conveyed by all the human predecessors forever abides in the text.

It is noteworthy that two thirds of my interviewees confidently stressed a continued ideological and spiritual unity between the human Gurus and the scripture, and were of the strong opinion that each line, word, and hymn of the text was equally important and powerful independent of the individual author.<sup>274</sup> The Guru Granth Sahib is regarded a complete whole and no ontological distinction is made between the agency and authority of the Guru enshrined in a human or a text. Both of the categories encapsulate and communicate the true Guru of *gurbani*. At the succession of Guru Granth Sahib the outer appearance of the Guru was merely transformed, whereas the interior “spirit” remained the same. The spiritual unity was part of the order given by Guru Gobind Singh.

Comparing Sikh conceptualizations about scripture to other Indian religions it may be interesting to observe Buddhist textual models and theories about the multiple levels of Buddha’s embodiment after his death. Legends in the Theravada tradition relate how Buddha instructed his followers to hold his “truths” and “rules of order” as the spiritual teacher and hand over his remains to wise men for cremation and erection of stupas in his memory.<sup>275</sup> The Buddhist tradition came to incorporate the two legacies of Buddha’s embodiment in *rupakaya*, which is the body of physical form, and *dharmakaya*, or the body of dharma which came to be identified with a scriptural tradition. As Gray (2005) writes:

Buddhists developed the concept of the two bodies of a Buddha, his physical “form body” (*rupakaya*) and his “body of Dharma” (*dharmakaya*), which consisted of the records of his teachings or collections of his enlightened qualities. While the former was, at his death, cre-

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<sup>273</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 99.

<sup>274</sup> The remaining part of the interlocutors gave greater importance to separate compositions, like *Sukhmani Sahib* and *Japji Sahib*, which they personally liked and considered extraordinarily powerful in comparison with other hymns of the scripture.

<sup>275</sup> Reynolds 1977: 375 – 376.

mated and reduced to the relics which were enshrined throughout the Buddhist world, the latter lives on, so to speak, in the teaching of Buddhism.<sup>276</sup>

After the death of the living Buddha, the “form body” was manifested in his relics contained in stupas and images of the Buddha which became objects of worship, while the “body of Dharma” came to signify canonical scriptures that embodied his teaching which Buddhist followers were to study, recite and interpret. Historical and iconographic data indicates a co-presence of Buddha’s dual legacy in the Buddhist world which is tangibly illustrated in religious practices of preserving Dharma texts in special containers or place them inside Buddha statues.

Sikh conceptions about the Guru Granth Sahib are rooted in a somewhat similar theory about the Guru’s embodiment – the eternal teaching being manifested in physical form of the human Gurus and later in the form of a text. The transfer of authority moved the divine words – the true *shabad*-Guru revealed in sound – to the visual centre of a written text and the book continues to manifest the eternal words in the world. Unlike the Buddhist model, however, the Sikh tradition proclaims the scripture has continued a succession line and office of a worldly preceptor after the human Gurus. In the Sikh case the Guru Granth Sahib does not merely manifest a “dharma body” of the eternal Guru, but the physical book (and not relics of the human Gurus) is also the worldly manifestation of the Guru’s “form body”, which should be venerated in the same manner as the bodily manifestations of the human preceptors once were. The Buddhist analogy still highlights the significant implications which religious theoretical models about external and internal embodiments might have on worship and ritual practices. The Sikh distinction between the book form of the Guru and the “spirit” within its pages makes it possible, at least on an analytical level, to distinguish between religious practices that primarily aim to honor the physical manifestations of a Guru communicating a spiritual teaching in a historical time and space, and religious practices that serves to establish interactions with the divine messages it enshrines. In other words, there are practices to and for the external “form” or body of the Guru Granth Sahib, as well as worship acts by which devotees activate and engage in the interior spiritual teaching of the text. The distinction between the two categories of practices becomes quite significant if we are to understand the form and function of the careful ministration Sikhs are offering to their Guru-scripture.

A consequence of attributing the Guru Granth Sahib the same agency and authority as of ten human predecessors is that the exterior life of scripture comes to assume anthropomorphic qualities – a phenomenon articulated metaphorically on a discursive level and which becomes tangible in ritual enactments and behaviours of the Sikhs. A number of anthropological studies from different parts of the world have

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<sup>276</sup> Gray 2005. On representation and worship of images of physical books in medieval Buddhist iconography and literature, see also Kinnard 1999, 2006.

shown that cosmologies and systems of religious beliefs underlying the ritual treatment of sacred objects quite often depart from an *anthropomorphic* thought and practice: religious objects, crafted or natural, are treated like social mediators, and sometimes as independent persons, which are endowed with humanlike characteristics, behaviours and attributes.<sup>277</sup> Religious people may root the anthropomorphic identity of an inanimate entity in mythologies and beliefs of an original humanity shared with human beings.<sup>278</sup> In other instances, anthropomorphism refers to the perceptions of nonhuman beings, such as deities and spirits, which assume human form and behaviours.<sup>279</sup> Anthropomorphism, as the tendency to attribute human-like qualities to inanimate objects or animals, sometimes operates merely on the basis of analogy, that is, metaphorically people think or write about objects, animals, natural forces, etc., as if they were having human-like characteristics.<sup>280</sup> The presence of efficiency and power that religious people ascribe to anthropomorphized objects seem to be reinforced by means of ritual enactments and a careful ministration of the objects. On appropriate occasions the objects may be ritually activated or “awaken” to mediate and establish relationship between the world of humans and the world of God, spirits, or ancestors.

At first glance these general ideas evoked by the term anthropomorphism may not appear applicable to the Sikh case, considering that the material body of Guru Granth Sahib remains a book, and not a human, with an interior that manifests revealed words of transcendent origin. Neither the material body nor the spiritual content of the Guru Granth Sahib is considered human in any organic sense. In Sikh literature that evolved from the eighteenth century onwards, however, the image of a human body appears in narratives presenting the Guru Granth Sahib. Deliberate attempts to alter or misuse the content of the scripture are thought of as serious in-

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<sup>277</sup> For case-studies on anthropomorphized ritual objects, see eg. Jeudy-Ballini & Juillerat 2002.

<sup>278</sup> This type of anthropomorphization seems to be typical of Amerindian cosmologies. In a paper titled “Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies” De Castro (2004) describes how Amerindian people perceive animals, spirits, and other nonhumans in the world as persons – anthropomorphic beings that experience their habits and characteristics in the form of (human) culture and to whom humans have social relationships. What is believed to be the original common condition for both humans and animals is humanity, in other words, animals are ex-humans who share the same spiritual components as humans. Comparing Amerindian worldviews with European, De Castro argues that the Western evolutionary thinking has been and still is guided by an anthropocentric thinking, whereas the Amerindian worldviews are anthropomorphic in character, in the sense that people are attributing nonhumans personhood, consciousness, intentionality, and even cultural habits similar to humans.

<sup>279</sup> This application of anthropomorphism is fundamental to incarnation theories and characteristic of icon-worship, such as Hindu gods, goddesses, and saints portrayed in humanized forms.

<sup>280</sup> As Gell strongly purports, anthropomorphism or “the tendency to impute human attributes such as will and agency to supposedly inanimate entities” is an inclination by no means typical only of religious people but a prevailing feature of human cognition in general (Gell 1998: 121).

fringement on the “body” of the Guru.<sup>281</sup> Contemporary Sikhs occasionally extend the framework of the Guru-body metaphor to a ritualized act of reciting from the scripture. “When doing recitations of Guru Granth Sahib ji, if you make a mistake [in reciting] there is a chance that the Guru will loose a body part”, an elderly Sikh man in Varanasi related. In these utterances both the scriptural content and form is imagined and figuratively described in human terms as a complete body of the Guru.

The tendency to attribute and represent abstract ideas and powers in organic metaphors is in no way particular for the Sikhs, but seems to be a common tendency among humans to describe their relationship to objects. People model the world on the most immediate experiences of the body and “employ that selfsame model as a source of labels and concepts to interpret the world outside the body”.<sup>282</sup> Moreover,

the careful choreography of action in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib has also come to assume a form “as if” the text indeed possesses human qualities and needs. The emic historical account on the installation of the Sikh scripture in 1604 depicts Guru Arjan as an active agent, stipulating archetypical acts of the daily ceremonies performed for the scripture. To emphasize the majesty and high prestige of the compiled manuscript the Guru embedded the text in courtly symbolism of human



The *granthi* is venerating the scripture, installed on a palanquin, by waving a whisk

culture. The story narrating Gobind Singh’s nomination of the Guru Granth Sahib in 1708 brings the connection with the text and human culture to the front stage. When Gobind Singh ritually installed the scripture in a manner similar to enthronement ceremonies for human Gurus and commanded that devotional stances which disciples had taken up towards the Gurus would likewise apply to the scripture, he did not merely decree the transfer of agency to *gurbani* dwelling in the Guru Granth Sahib. By doing this he also established a tradition of venerating the corpus (*sarup*) of text in the same manner as its predecessors. That believing Sikhs take this command seriously is evident. “We have to give proper respect to the Guru Granth Sahib ji as we give to the Gurus who had human bodies. If we will make any mistake in this regard we commit sins,” a Sikh man in his twentieth said.

<sup>281</sup> For the eighteenth century writer Kesar Singh Chibbar this analogy was close at hand. For the reference, consult Mann 2001: 124.

<sup>282</sup> Ellen 1988: 223.

With the shift of authority, the same ethos and modes of practices that presumably existed in the human culture surrounding the personal Gurus were valid for the contexts in which the Sikhs interacted with the Guru Granth Sahib. The exterior life of the book was to be characterized by an anthropomorphic habitus, that is, the scripture was imposed by a set of culturally defined and stipulated habits ascribed to the domestic and courtly life of the human Gurus. In a new historical setting with a non-human Guru, these habits were to be furnished and actualized through diverse practices executed by the Sikhs. Just as the scribe Bhai Gurdas informs us that Guru Nanak sat on a cot (*manji*) and uttered hymns at Kartarpur, the Sikhs should place the Guru Granth Sahib on a bed covered with robes whenever it was sung or recited from.<sup>283</sup> Like the historical Gurus presumably rose before dawn to mediate and receive followers at court, contemporary Sikhs impose a similar habit to the scripture by installing it on a throne for devotional gatherings in the early morning hours. When I inquired a local *granthi* in Varanasi about the custom of wrapping the scripture in layers of robes, the anthropomorphic analogy lied near at hand:

This is the dress of Guru Granth Sahib ji. Just like we dress up in different clothes, Guru Granth Sahib ji has underwear and outer garments. The [human] Gurus never asked for these things. They said we do not have to offer them clothes because they never feel cold. But still we do it [to the Guru Granth Sahib] for respect.

Parallels to social customs and routines of the human Gurus are often drawn when Sikhs are explaining ritual conducts and symbols in contemporary worship. As the *granthi* accentuated in this conversation, the Sikh Gurus did not require dresses because of physical needs, but as individuals in a human culture they wore clothes and accepted offerings presented by their followers in acts of veneration. Similarly, the Guru in the guise of a scripture cannot experience bodily sensations, but still Sikh disciples will wrap the book in robes to protect the scriptural body and express devotion. A set of selected social and cultural habits which aimed to confirm the supreme status and identity of the human Gurus perpetuated into the future life of and around the Guru Granth Sahib, albeit reshaped to more invariant ritualized events in order to meet a situation that explicitly necessitated the presence and performance of human disciple-agents. If the human Gurus were agents causing their own action in the everyday life – waking up, dressing, going to sleep, and so on – and in words and deeds stipulated a solemnized treatment of the scripture, Sikh followers are now the agentive force of all activities carried out in the surrounding of Guru Granth Sahib. In other words, the anthropomorphic habits imposed on the scripture only exist so far as there are human agents who possess dispositions necessary to act out these habits in practice.

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<sup>283</sup> The reference is found in *Var* 1:38 of Bhai Gurdas (Jodh Singh 1998: 68).

As the following sections of this chapter will discuss further, ritual conducts in Sikh worship simultaneously construct and confirm perceptions of a book endowed with social agency of a personal Guru. The Sikhs do not merely replicate actions that the Gurus and disciples did in history, but are continually creating habits and routines of the Guru Granth Sahib within the framework of a social relationship patterned after human roles and relations. Historical accounts that seek to elucidate the origin and ascendance of the scripture to the office of the Guru are, on the other hand, discursive devices to traditionalize current practices and justify their anthropomorphic character by evoking links to the agentive human Gurus in the past.

### GURBANI AND BHAGAT BANI

The Sikh scripture incorporates not only compositions of six Gurus but fifteen non-Sikh *bhagats* or saints, of which three come from Muslim background and twelve belong to the Hindu fold. Every evening in the gurdwara Sikh musicians (*ragi*) will perform a set of hymns ascribed to saint poets outside the Sikh tradition.<sup>284</sup> One legitimate question to put forward in this context is whether local Sikhs make any distinction between compositions of the Gurus and those attributed to non-Sikh saints, or do they take up a more holistic view to the Guru Granth Sahib. When people are speaking of *gurbani* as the “speech” of the Guru, does the term only refer to words of the Sikh Gurus or more inclusively embrace compositions of Hindu and Muslim *bhagats*? Are the saint poets included in the notion of the “spirit” which the Guru inhabits?

The status of the *bhagat bani*, or the words and utterances of *bhagats*, in relation to the Gurus’ compositions has been a recurring topic in textualist approaches to the Sikh scripture. Scholars have often attempted to explain the underlying reasons for the presence of bards and Hindu and Muslim saint poets in the Sikh scriptural tradition.<sup>285</sup> A popular perception among my interlocutors bestow the hymns of non-Sikh saints an equal status as the Gurus’ composition for the reason that their poetry was incorporated in the scripture on Guru Arjan’s decision. Conceptually they will distinguish between the words of the Gurus (*gurbani*) and the words of *bhagats* (*bhagat bani*) and yet lay claim that both categories share the ontological status as *gurbani*. By the historical processes of creating and canonizing the Sikh scripture and its succession to the office of the Guru, compositions of the Sikh Gurus and non-Sikh poets merged into a single category of *gurbani*: utterances of the present Guru of Guru Granth Sahib. Therefore, Sikhs will not distinguish between the Sikh Gurus and the *bhagats* in terms of their spiritual progress and relationship to God. All communicate

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<sup>284</sup> The composition *Arti* is sung every evening in the gurdwara and contains writings attributed to Kabir, Ravidas, and Dhanna, as well as hymns derived from the Dasam Granth.

<sup>285</sup> For an overview of different positions among Sikh scholars, consult Pashaura Singh (2000) and Gurinder Singh Mann (2001). Both pay attention to the Gurus’ method of providing textual commentaries on *bhagat bani*, the position of saint poets within the internal structure of the Sikh scripture, and historical manuscripts which present *bhagats* as pious disciples of Guru Nanak.

divine messages and enjoy the same spiritual authority as mediums to God. Only a younger Sikh woman was of a slightly dissimilar opinion as she perceived *gurbani* to be a “more secure way” to reach God: “The *bani* of Sants take you to the Gurus’ thoughts, and the Gurus’ *bani* take you to God,” she said. The apparently unanimous standpoint is anchored in the belief in complete doctrinal identity between *gurbani* and *bhagat bani*, and perceptions of Guru Granth Sahib as an inseparable whole, sanctioned by the Sikh Gurus.

Emic arguments to support the notion of doctrinal agreement between the Sikh Gurus and bhagats often point to a theological and soteriological consensus – they share the same gist or essence (*nichor*) of the belief in a formless God (*Nirankar*) without attribute (*nirguna*) and provide similar teachings on the way to pursue liberation. Differences are restricted to stylistic matters – all saintly persons, including the Sikh Gurus, spoke and preached according to their individual style and life-situation. Several interlocutors distinguished between those hymns which made the way into Guru Granth Sahib and *kacchi bani*, or “unsound” or “unripe” poetry of other saint poets who Guru Arjan disqualified on basis of the arrogance and egotism contained in their compositions. Bhagats like Ravidas, Kabir, Sheik Farid and others were, on the other hand, incorporated because they were “enlightened humans from different castes who praised God without arrogance”, an elderly Sikh man expressed.<sup>286</sup> As maintained by these interpretations, Hindu and Muslim saints and the Sikh Gurus were equally graced with divine knowledge and operated within human-divine relationships based on pure love and devotion. Only Guru Arjan had agency and authority to determine which hymns of non-Sikhs communicated divine messages to be incorporated in the Sikh scripture and by doing this he lent *bhagat bani* the same authentic status as *gurbani*.

With the succession of Guru Granth Sahib to the office of the Guru the equal status of *bhagat bani* and *gurbani* became even more pronounced. Some of my interlocutors would in fact argue that all compositions of bards and saint poets became *gurbani* as a consequence of the scriptural succession. This understanding presumes that the term *gurbani* does not merely refer to hymns written by the Sikh Gurus, but more widely connotes divine words and knowledge that emanate from all compositions within Guru Granth Sahib. “It is all *gurbani*. From page 1 to page 1430 I do not see any difference, because I consider Guru Granth Sahib ji as the Guru,” a young Sikh man said. In its completeness the scripture communicates “utterances” (*bani*) of the true Guru contained in the words and teachings of the historical Sikh Gurus, bards, and saint poets. This unity is further displayed in the form of Guru Granth Sahib. Although the scripture contains several languages and dialects, all words are communicated in the script Gurmukhi, literally “the mouth of the Guru”. To read the written script is thus to take part of words stemming from the Guru’s mouth whether it contains sacred poetry of the Sikh Gurus or the bhagats. Considering that many

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<sup>286</sup> To illustrate the intimate relationship with bhagats and God the man retold the popular story about the farming *jat* Dhanna who became a bhagat out of sincere devotion.

Sikhs believe the scripture embodies the spirit of all the human Gurus, the presence of bhagats is considered to make the text an even more precious subject of veneration. A 50 year-old man phrased this rather egalitarian standpoint in the following way:

The spirits of ten Gurus are in Guru Granth Sahib ji. There are the words (*bani*) of the Gurus and the saint poets (*bhagats*), so when you are saluting Guru Granth Sahib ji then you are not merely bowing in front of these ten great persons, but a large number of great saints (*bhagats*). All is combined in Guru Granth Sahib ji.

Just like the human Sikh Gurus, the bhagats were liberated souls who enshrined a divine light or spirit (*jot*) which is now forever embodied in the words of Guru Granth Sahib. The spirit of the true Guru of *gurbani* is enclosed by the scriptural body and can be activated whenever words of the Sikh Gurus and the poet saints are read, sung or listened to.

Many religious Sikhs will take up a similar inclusive attitude as regards to hymns ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh in Dasam Granth, or “the tenth book”, which is popularly taken to mean the book of the tenth Guru. Although the authenticity and authorship of this book continues to incite controversies among Sikh intellectuals,<sup>287</sup> local people seem relatively unmoved by the debates and generally perceive the text as genuine *gurbani*. Even the standardized Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) is now and then labeled as *gurbani*, since its opening section is derived from the composition *Chandi di Var* in Dasam Granth. Particularly the hymns *Jap Sahib*, *Chaupai Sahib*, and *Tav Prashad Savaiyye*, recited daily by *Amritdhari* Sikhs, are assumed to be words which emanated directly from the Guru’s mouth. As I was told by some interlocutors, the hymns of Guru Gobind Singh were not included in Guru Granth Sahib for the reason that they displayed a confident attitude of a warrior and were too “hard” in character. Yet people will still categorize and address these hymns as *gurbani*.

#### A TREASURE OF KNOWLEDGE

To most local Sikhs the formless God is the ultimate target of devotion and worship, but it is only through the assistance of the Guru that humans can establish relationships to the invisible divine. Without the Guru human devotees remain helpless and trapped in self-centredness and attachments to the world. “The Guru’s words give us knowledge. The Guru is a treasure of knowledge. To reach God you need knowledge from the Guru. Without the Guru there will be no knowledge (*Bin Guru Gian na hoi*),” an elderly Sikh man quoted a popular epigram included in the Guru Granth Sahib. It is only through the knowledge and guidance of the words of the scripture that devotees can form efficacious relationship with the invisible Supreme Being.

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<sup>287</sup> For an overview, consult Mann 2005.



Local Sikhs will say that the Guru “shows the way to God”, “removes obstacles on the devotional path” and “inspires people to get closer to God”.

As the previous sections illustrated, local Sikhs believe divine knowledge was revealed to the human Gurus, who mediated these messages to the world through utterances (*gurbani*) that are perpetually manifest in the corpus of Guru Granth Sahib. When the Sikh scripture was invested the authority of a Guru, the text assumed the two-folded role of transmitting divine messages and providing spiritual guidance to humanity through the teaching it enshrines. The scripture is considered to contain knowledge of God and provide the Guru’s teaching or precept (*gurmat*) that will illuminate the path towards salvation. “*Gurbani* comes from God and through *gurbani* you will find God,” a male interlocutor said. There is no clear separation between the teacher and the teaching, since the Guru Granth Sahib, like its predecessors, embodies the knowledge it mediates.

The knowledge referred to in these discourses is not necessarily insights achieved through the intellectual exercise of logical reasoning, but much grander ontological and aesthetical experiences of God, within oneself and in all created beings. Especially in Guru Nanak’s compositions “the unspoken speech” (*akath katha*) often stands for divine knowledge and experiences that internally reveal to the one who has reached a final spiritual stage and will be graced liberation.<sup>288</sup> This inexpressible speech – a mystical knowledge that descends directly from a divine source and dwells in the mind of the enlightened – is beyond human categorizations and can only be converted to language by those who have been granted permission to speak by God. In this sense divine knowledge signifies a direct communication with the transcendent divine in the human interior.

My interlocutors made a somewhat clear distinction between two categories of knowledge relevant to Sikh worship: *viddya* denotes knowledge pursued from worldly studies and practices, and *gian* signifies internal and spiritual knowledge of the divine. When lay Sikhs or professional performers in the gurdwara learn meditation techniques and the art of reciting *gurbani*, singing *kirtan*, and expounding the scripture, they pursue education and knowledge in the former category. To read books, listen to stories, go on pilgrimage and the like, are similarly intellectual and bodily practices to gain cognitive knowledge about the Sikh tradition, history and teaching. *Gian*, on the other hand, stands for more esoteric knowledge which emanates from God and the divine kindness bestowed to humans. Although the individual Sikh may learn the devotional methods and continually engage in worship, only those who have been blessed with spiritual knowledge will understand the relations between God, the individual self, and the creation. To be well-educated in the scripture is thus a different thing from having understanding of the spiritual truths within its pages. As religious Sikhs would argue, all the Sikh Gurus possessed the latter kind of knowledge and were authorized to speak to the world. *Gurbani* is therefore full with true knowledge of God and instructions on the way to reach God.

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<sup>288</sup> See e.g. GGS: 1032, 1093, 1291.

It is noteworthy that more than one third of my interlocutors utilized the image of a school or classroom situation when they verbally depicted their personal relationship to Guru Granth Sahib. A shorter excerpt from a conversation with a young Sikh man may exemplify:

If you are going to school everyday... only to see the face of your teacher... then you will not pass your exam. You have to listen and learn from your teacher. His teaching is important. In the same way the Guru's teaching is *gurbani*. The Guru knows God and provides inspiration and instructions on how to reach that treasure. In each hymn there are answers to all your questions. If you follow that it will change your life. There is no benefit of just reading.... you have to follow the teaching.

Attending school is a cultural experience shared by many people. The image includes the social aspect of getting together as students in a corporative social order which provides a clear differentiation between the subordinate students and the superior teacher and teaching. The individual student will have to accept the forms of authority and commit to disciplined routines in order to learn and be socialized in a teaching. Through punctual attendance and attentiveness to the teaching the student may transform his or her actions, personal dispositions, and cultivate the inner self. The schooling experience implicates a process of maturation, during which hard and sincere work in the "classroom" will be rewarded. "If we are attentive to the Guru's teaching we will pass the exam," another interlocutor said. God will reward all those devotees who fully give themselves over to the instructions of the much higher teaching and discipline of the Guru.

To create links with the invisible divine being Sikh devotees must firstly build up positive relationships to the present Guru – the teaching in Guru Granth Sahib – and venerate the physical scripture for what it contains and mediates. The character of these relationships are both didactical and social, in the sense that Sikh devotees should attentively read, comprehend, and follow the teaching, and serve the Guru personified in the sacred text. The normative stance of disciples is submission to the superior Guru and the binding force between disciples and the Guru is devotion. This power relation is not considered to be a compromise with individual freedom, but rather it is a way to cultivate humility that will grant merits and protection. The disciples surrender and attentively create relatedness to the Guru as they approach the physical body of Guru Granth Sahib and engage in its words.

## PERSONIFYING A TEXT

For students of religion who have been fostered in a secular Western tradition governed by an objectivist epistemology, the Sikh ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib as a living Guru endowed with habits of the human culture may at first appear irrational or even mysterious. In the daily liturgy of the gurdwara they attend the scripture like a royalty granting audience: they present it with prayers, food, clothes, and offerings to be blessed; put it to sleep in a human bed at night; and recite and listen to its words as if the Guru continued to give verbal instructions to disciples. It is easy to relegate these conducts to a symbolic field of religious beliefs and practices, but much harder to understand the emic ontology underlying the uses and treatment of the text. From the objectivist presupposition of what a book can or cannot be, the Sikh scripture remains a manmade object, inscribed with written signs, that serves to communicate a semantically comprehensible content. The book can metaphorically be likened to a person because it shares many characteristic with humans, as the corporeal presence in the world, but would still be objectified as a silent “thing” made of paper and ink, which is granted sanctification as “holy” because of the teaching it contains but is otherwise “dead” and spiritless without possibilities to bear any human-like traits. Another ethos seems to predominate in the local Sikh culture. Although Sikhs know that a book and a person are two separate categories, and that a book cannot be human in any biological sense, they still treat and speak of the Guru Granth Sahib as if it was an agentive entity endowed with “personhood” and human-like habits. Instead of objectifying the Guru Granth Sahib to merely a thing, Sikhs seem to personify and adduct a maximum of social agency to the text.

In general terms personification refers to the common tendency to endow non-human entities with qualities of personal traits, sometimes particular human properties, in concept and figuratively in language. The object personified will be treated as if it was a “person”, or “superperson”,<sup>289</sup> imbued with extra powers and status of higher rank, which/who may demonstrate varying degrees of intentionality and social agency. The thing-person may indeed be *animated*, that is, regarded as if it inhabits a soul, is socially alive, and possesses capacities to communicate ideas, exchange gifts with humans and in other ways expresses the underlying relationality that defines its position.<sup>290</sup> In instances of what Ellen (1988) calls “active personification”, or a high degree of attribution of personal qualities, “[o]bjects are frequently represented as if they were human, are involved in processes which are recognisably human, are treated in ways that human are treated – and in particular are in themselves subject of rites of passage, other rituals and attitudes, which are usually reserved for humans.”<sup>291</sup> As many anthropologists emphasize, personification of objects occurs in the

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<sup>289</sup> The term “superperson” is derived from Bird-David’s (1999) paper on personification of *devaru* spirits among the Nayaka people in South India.

<sup>290</sup> See e.g. De Castro 2004, Harvey 2006: xvii.

<sup>291</sup> Ellen 1988: 225.

context of social relationships, within which the object transforms into a subject believed to interact and respond to approaches made by other persons.

In a work titled *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Gell (1998) argues that inanimate objects may indeed have a “personhood” and operate in the social world as mediators of “social agency”.<sup>292</sup> Without relying on linguistic models and symbolic interpretations, Gell proposes an action-centered approach that focuses on the social relations in which people and objects interact and hold interchangeable roles. An art object (or a religious object for that matter) does not have any “intrinsic” nature or meaning outside its social and relational contexts, but is firmly settled within a system of action “intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it”.<sup>293</sup> As Gell suggests, one should therefore focus on these social relations in the vicinity of objects and approach the object as a material “index” that allows for the cognitive operation, which he calls, “the abduction of agency” and especially “social agency”.<sup>294</sup> An index is not simply *like* something (as an icon) but it *is* something. People will treat a material object (or an “index”) as a social agent who/which possesses will, character and ability to act on will. Gell’s clarification of “agency” should be quoted, since he is careful to distinguish an anthropological understanding of the term from that of philosophers and sociologists:

Agency is attributable to those persons (and things, see below) who /which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. ...For the anthropologist ‘folk’ notions of agency, extracted from everyday practices and discursive forms, are of concern, not ‘philosophically defensible’ notions of agency. ...The idea of agency is a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when that happens it is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an ‘intention’ lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of ‘agency’.<sup>295</sup>

Unlike anthropocentric standpoints that hold agency to be a permanent dispositional characteristic of an (biological) entity, particularly that of living humans, Gell suggests a relational and context-dependant view on agency, which can be attributed to

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<sup>292</sup> As Gell writes, “since the outset of the discipline, anthropology has been signally preoccupied with a series of problems to do with ostensibly peculiar relations between persons and ‘things’ which somehow ‘appear as’, or do duty as persons.” Gell 1998:9. In the eighteenth century Taylor’s skeptical study on “animism” – the attribution of life to inanimate things – and the theory of exchange discussed in the works of Malinowski and Mauss hinted at this theme.

<sup>293</sup> Gell 1998: 6.

<sup>294</sup> Gell 1998: 13.

<sup>295</sup> Gell 1998: 16 – 17.

both persons and inanimate “things”. According to this theory, persons and objects hold two interchangeable positions in a social relationship: an “agent” who exercises “agency” and is thus invested with intentionality and causes action, while the counterpart of an agent is a “patient” who is casually affected by the actions of the agent.<sup>296</sup> Many of the devotional practices people are performing to religious objects, such as offering food and drinkables, may appear irrational considering that objects do not have a biological life. A fundamental question to pose in this context is how can an entity be invested with subjectivity and intention without being biologically alive? In his answer, Gell strongly emphasizes that “social agency” is never defined in terms of biological qualities; the object is not ascribed a biological life or attributes, and if it would demonstrate organic functions, like bleeding or crying, religious people would most probably consider it to be a miracle. Religious people are more than well aware of the categorical distinction between humans and a manmade thing, such as a book. “Social agency”, on the other hand, is relational and what matters when ascribing agency to an object is where “it stands in a network of social relations”. One thing that is required for a “thing” to become a social agent is the nearby presence of human agents, not that the “thing” is a human itself.<sup>297</sup>

As anthropologists have demonstrated there are surely many processes by which material objects can be invested agency to become socially alive. The strategies Gell mentions involve internal and external aspects, both of which find expressions in ritualized routines and behavior in the human environment surrounding the material object. From a behaviorist standpoint the attribution of a “mental state” to things or humans who people imagine as intentional can never be fully proved and only expressed in outer actions of people. Still it remains that people ascribe a spirit, soul, or a “mental state” to the inner part of an object. This makes them concerned with spatial and “concentric” matters, that is, where and in which way objects should be preserved, covered, hidden, or displayed. By ethnographic illustrations from different cultures and time periods, Gell describes how people animate or impose “soul” and agency on objects by making them a “patient” in the social exchanges of ritual practices: the internal strategy is to place life-substances within the objects or wrap them with clothes or various layers of “skins”, and the external strategy is to enmesh the objects in daily routines and create spaces to emphasize their interior identity. From a religious point of view, however, these practices are not held to be just symbolic acts but are indeed believed to be real ministration of a deity or dignified person.<sup>298</sup>

The Sikh tradition makes it clear that the Guru Granth Sahib is far from being a spiritless object: the scripture allocates the intra-spirit which successively inhabited the bodies of ten human Gurus in a line of transmission and was activated through the ritual installation of the individual Guru. Through processes of objectifications

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<sup>296</sup> The artist of the object, the prototype used for creating it, the audience, and the object itself, are all parts of what Gell terms the “art nexus”. The different parts of the art nexus can operate as either “agents” or “patients” in numerous combinations.

<sup>297</sup> Gell 1998: 123.

<sup>298</sup> Gell 1998: 135 – 136.

within the tradition the teaching of the human Gurus and their intimate relationships to the divine were forever manifested in the body of the text, just as the capacities of the causative Guru is enduringly immanent and reified in the words and teaching of the book.

When local Sikhs in Varanasi were asked to personally describe what the Guru Granth Sahib meant to them, several interlocutors chose to tell what the Guru had done or brought about in their social life – a healthy son, a good business, and so on – either as a blissful gift to receive subsequent acts of thanksgiving or a reciprocation of devotional acts already performed. These events were not viewed merely as haphazard happenings, but casual histories about divine interventions through the agency of the Guru. As such they were taken as evidence to prove that a good relationship with the Guru will counteract problems in the everyday life and generate good results for humans. The basic assumption underlying these accounts was that the spiritual agency of Guru Granth Sahib is in no sense divorced from materiality, but has capacity to act in the world and mediate communications between humans and God. Following the theory of Gell, attribution of the agentive force to Guru Granth Sahib is not complicated by the fact that it is a book, simply because agency is relational. Guru Granth Sahib is not a symbol representing the Guru or an icon like the Guru; the Sikh scripture *is* the Guru firmly embedded in a network of historical and contemporary relationships to humans. Possible relationships between the Sikh Guru and disciples did not come to end because the succession line of human Gurus was discontinued. At the present the Guru Granth Sahib stands in a web of human relations, surrounded by pious devotees who in acts of veneration and devotion continue to construct relationships with the Guru that take on the quality of social relations.

From one viewpoint the social character of relationships to Guru Granth Sahib can be approached as an example of the common tendency among religious people to pattern relations and interactions with superior nonhuman beings after social relationships in the intrahuman world. As Olsson (2006) suggests, religion can be viewed as a relational concept and religious life becomes a “projection” of human conditions and relationships – fortified in language uses and bodily movements – onto nonhuman entities. Things, plants, and living beings become a part of the web of social relations in which we are entangled.<sup>299</sup> Labels and concepts used for relationships in religious contexts are analogically modeled after human experiences and socially defined roles within the world. From this perspective one could argue that modes which the Sikhs would use to establish relatedness with a superior human preceptor brim over to contexts in which Sikhs confront and interact with the Guru Granth Sahib.

From another angle of approach, one can also observe that, as and when people engage in objects, they personify and attribute the object with social agency. Sikhs may a priori consider the Guru Granth Sahib a living Guru, as the tradition advocates. Through the daily ministration and devotional acts directed to the scripture

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<sup>299</sup> Olsson 2006a: 141 – 150.

they also construct and maintain social relationships and make the scripture a “social other” invested agency of an authoritative personal Guru. By modes of speech and ritual behaviors of devotees the Guru Granth Sahib becomes a cultural and social “person” of exalted status who continues to speak and act in the world. Because the scripture is believed to facilitate a real physical channel of communication with the divine, Sikhs will present wishes and requests to the text and make various types of promises in its immediate physical presence. A male interlocutor in his forties said: “It is our present Guru. If you have any questions you just go to Guru Granth Sahib ji, do *Ardas* (the Sikh supplication), take the *Hukam* (divine order) and you will get answers immediately.” The hymn that appears on the left page when the text is randomly opened constitutes the divine order that is assumed to be the Guru’s guiding reply on a human appeal presented in a formal petition (see below part 2). The combination of the two speech acts – the reading of the prayer and the divine order – assume a dialogical character in that they establish an ongoing direct communication between humans and the divine through the mediating link of the Guru. God manifests the divine will through the Guru who continues to act in the world. This idea presumes that Guru Granth Sahib is a subject able to provide guidance and reciprocate intentional stances that humans adapt to the text.

Some local Sikhs would argue that the scripture has capacities to see and foresee what is happening in its immediate spatial presence and the social life of devotees. An elderly Sikh woman alleged that the four circumambulations (*char lavan*) around Guru Granth Sahib in the wedding ceremony are of great importance because the Guru is present as a witness (*sakhi*) of the acts which contract a marriage. There are a number of other practices that suggest applicability of the notion of personhood and which here may be exemplified by the ways in which Sikhs use epithets for the scripture, offer and exchange food with the text, and officially recognize Guru Granth Sahib as a juridical person which can owe properties.

#### ANIMATED EPITHETS

Ritually and linguistically Sikhs will distinguish between the Guru Granth Sahib printed in one single volume and the scripture (as well as translations thereof) published in two or more volumes. The later goes by the name *sanchi*, which means “volume” or “separate part of a book”,<sup>300</sup> and thus implies dividable properties. The forms of address will change when the scripture is published in one single volume and thereby is treated as a Guru. Using a personal pronoun such as “it”, which is a reference we normally utilize for inanimate objects, would be considered extremely derogatory to the scripture. Instead local Sikhs will address the text with a number of terms of respect that serves to indicate the superior status of the text and power relations actualized between the speaker and the signified. In addition to the common title Guru Granth Sahib, the Sanskrit term *maharaja*, literally “the great king”, is widely used with the prefix “Guru” when Sikhs refer to the scripture in everyday

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<sup>300</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 132.

conversations. An equally common term of address among my interlocutors is the Persian word *Baba*, which signifies a father, a holy man, or some other senior and respected persons of male gender, and is followed by the customary suffix of respect “ji”. Most of the epithets which Sikhs give their scripture in everyday speech are common terms for human subjects invested with power. Considering that the text belongs to a succession line of male human Gurus, the terms of respect are grammatically in masculine gender.

The Sikhs thus adopt the conventional honorific nomenclature used for male subjects in secular and religious contexts of the surrounding society to name and cognitively classify the text with a living person of higher position and not as an inanimate object.<sup>301</sup> The honorific titles associates the Sikh scripture with social categories of human beings, “yielding a language that is stereotypically identified with persona and personhood – a language whose cultural value is shaped in part by the trope of personification.”<sup>302</sup> Moreover, the epithets of Guru Granth Sahib possess pragmatic cultural values that implement a distinct social and interactional order. The honorific titles are what de Castro (2004) has termed “relational pointers”, that is, nouns that define something in terms of its relation to something else and are “two-place predicates”. A sovereign of worldly power will only exist and be addressed by the term “king” so far as there are other subjects who acknowledge his authority and whose king he is. Similarly a kinship term such as “Baba” designates a senior position of the subject only in relation to other subjects. The nouns do not merely represent the superior position of the Sikh scripture but indicate an internal relationship between a superior Guru and subordinate subject Sikhs. This relationality becomes even more palpable in the transaction of foods and other exchanges of gifts.

#### RELATING BY FOOD

“On the day of *sangrand* we go to the gurdwara and offer sesame sweets (*til patti*) to Guru Granth Sahib ji, we take the *prashad* [consecrated food] from it and return home”. The woman who uttered this sentence described a family custom of celebrating the first day of the solar Vikrami month. In the same breath she voiced a fundamental idea behind offerings made to the Sikh scripture: people bring ordinary food, fruits, sweets, and other edible objects to be presented before the text in the gurdwara and return home with parts of it as *prashad* – consecrated substances enriched with power and blessings of the Guru – to consume.

Different types of food offerings to the Guru Granth Sahib occur in the most diverse ritual settings of the Sikh life and are conducted with various degrees of re-

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<sup>301</sup> Harvey (2006) observes that in some indigenous languages and patterns of speech objects are even “grammatically animate rather than grammatically inanimate”, that is, the language does not grammatically distinguish between people and objects but will use nouns in animated gender for a number of non-living things which “can be spoken of and to as persons – as they are spoken with” (Harvey 2006: 33).

<sup>302</sup> Agha 1998: 178.



ciprocity, either for purely devotional purposes or as votive gifts to the Guru. Offerings may be a part of a larger ceremony or constitute the key act itself, and which type of food to be offered is usually determined by the social and ceremonial context.<sup>303</sup> The food especially associated with the Sikh tradition, however, is the pudding called *karah prashad*, or the sweetened wheat pudding which is prepared in a cauldron (*karah*) and served daily in gurdwaras. On any happy occasion, in times of need, or just for the sake of devotion, Sikhs will prepare *karah prashad* in their houses and bring it to the gurdwara as an offering to Guru Granth Sahib. Scholars frequently pay attention to the recipe for this special pudding – equal parts of clarified butter, sugar, and wheat flour are cooked together with water – but for some reason have neglected the most significant acts that are believed to consecrate and endow the food with the unique properties. Local Sikhs will sometimes make a clear distinction between *karah prashad* and other types of edible offerings, saying that the pudding is “real” *prashad* for the reason that “it is accepted (*kabul*) by the Guru” and “in this *prashad* we do the recitation of *Anand Sahib*”, as an attendant in the gurdwara explicated. Contrastingly, other food offerings that has not been ritually prepared are not formally “accepted” (*parvan nahi karte*) by the Guru. What distinguishes *karah prashad* from other types of food is the principle of sanctification, although other food can certainly be imbued with similar spiritual properties if offered and accepted by the Guru by the same ritual procedures.

The transformation of ordinary wheat pudding into consecrated food is dependent on three interrelated acts: the reading of the hymn *Anand Sahib* and the Sikh supplication *Ardas*, as well as the “offering by the dagger” (*kirpan bhet*).<sup>304</sup> An abbreviated form (stanza 1 – 5, and 40) of *Anand Sahib* should be liturgically sung or read prior to the reading of the prayer since the composition “helps the *prashad* to become more powerful,” as one attendant put it. The *gurbani* words uttered in sounds will transform into blissful substances in the pudding.<sup>305</sup> The iron bowl containing the

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<sup>303</sup> After childbirth, for instance, families will distribute large quantities of sweets to celebrate a joyful event, while food offerings at the event of a death depend upon the circumstances and cause of the death. Some families uphold monthly traditions of bringing sweet fried bread (*puri*) to the gurdwara on the full moon day (*puranmashi*) and prepare and serve rice pudding (*kir*) to the congregation on the day of a new moon (*masia*).

<sup>304</sup> The combination of these acts are far from modern, having occurred already in the eighteenth century *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, which prescribes *Anand Sahib* as a text to be read prior to the preparation of *karah prashad* and *Ardas* before the distribution of the food (McLeod 1987: 39). Another text called *Sakhi Rahit ki*, which is attached as an appendix to the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, similarly correlates the sacred food with the reading of *Anand Sahib* and *Ardas* in a short instruction on how Sikhs should commemorate a departed soul: “When someone has died, after preparing the tastiest food invite Khalsa. Read *Anand*, do *Ardas* and feed the Sikhs. The one who does this will have the offerings accepted and they also reach the ancestors” (McLeod 1987: 135). The contemporary Sikh code of conduct briefs a similar pattern of acts as the one described above.

<sup>305</sup> Some interlocutors emphasized the importance of people’s inner feelings and devotion when preparing the pudding. The feelings people might have in the moment of preparing the food

wheat pudding is placed in the physical presence of Guru Granth Sahib and before the last lines of the *Ardas* prayer the speaker will verbally express the offering. "We say this is the *prashad* for you, please accept it and we will give it to the *sangat*," the interlocutor exemplified. In same moment as these words (or formulations alike) are uttered one devotee will cut a straight line over the pudding with his or her dagger and thereby offer the food to the Guru and simultaneously have it approved by the Guru. The reading of *Ardas* is considered a necessary speech vehicle to articulate and confirm the action taking place, whereas the cutting of the dagger achieves the substantial transformation by means of a symbolic act. The verb compound used for the verbal and bodily acts in collegial speech is *bhog lagana*, which in a broader cultural Indian context generally refers to the act of offering food to a deity and thereby sanctifying it.<sup>306</sup> People will cut a line over the food with cutlery or other items to bless it before consumption. In the Sikh tradition the notion of *bhog lagana* has come to signify the crucial acts of making edible gifts "accepted" and blessed by the Guru. When the offering is completed, one attendant will take out five portions of the *karah prashad* to be served to the "five beloved" (*panj pyare*), representing the first five Sikhs who underwent the Khalsa ceremony in 1699. If no men symbolizing the "five beloved" are present, their share is simply re-mixed with the other food. A second portion of *karah prashad* is taken out and presented to Guru Granth Sahib in a small steel cup and subsequently given to the custodian of scripture (*granthi*) for consumption. Finally a third and larger part of the consecrated pudding will be shared out amongst the congregation and all people in attendance.

The concept and practice of *bhog lagana* also applies to food prepared in the communal kitchens (*langar*) of gurdwaras. In addition to collective efforts of preparing food while reciting the name of God (*Satnam Vahiguru*) and sharing food by sitting on the floor in lines (*pangat*), the essential constituent of the ritual preparation of *langar* is to offer pieces of food to the Guru Granth Sahib. Before concluding the *Ardas* in congregational worship one attendant will present the scripture with a glass of water and a plate (*thali*) with small representational portions of all the dishes to be served. By dipping the tip of the dagger in the water and symbolically cutting a straight line over the plate of food the meal is considered "accepted" by the Guru. That the meals served in *langar* are not considered ordinary food is apparent from the conventional rules of consumption. Devotees responsible for the public distribution will continually recite the divine name as they serve the dishes on plates and before the consumption loudly shout out the Sikh *jaikara* or salutation (*Jo bole so nihal, Sat Sri Akal*). This signals the congregation's joint approval to begin the meal. As a general rule, one should eat up food given from the communal kitchen and try not to waste leftovers, as it is a form of *prashad* with transformed properties. Since the tradition of

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will transfer to the pudding. It is therefore important to continually meditate upon the divine name – *Vahiguru* – when mixing the different ingredients of *karah prashad*.

<sup>306</sup> "to partake of food; to place food before (one); to offer food to an (idol)." McGregor 1997: 774. Evers describes how Buddhist monks on Sri Lanka are offering food to Buddha three times a day before they eat their meals (Evers 1972: 48 – 55) .

keeping *langar* can be traced back to the time of the human Gurus and the food served therein is considered consecrated, Sikhs will call the community kitchen in the gurdwara *Guru ka langar*, or “the communal kitchen of the Guru”, and thus grammatically indicate that both the custom and the food belongs to the Guru.



Preparing *karah prashad*



Public distribution of *prashad* on Guru Nanak's anniversary

The above examples illustrate that the Sikh practice of *bhog lagana* belongs to an exchange paradigm of action which implies transactions between devotees and the Guru. On behalf of a family or the community human agents will give food to the Guru, which sanctifies the offering and returns it as a blessed gift to the giver. Utilizing Gell's terminology, Sikh devotees are initially the active agents who cause donating acts, while the Guru is patient which receives an offering. Simultaneously the roles are reversed since the Guru is the primary causative agent who blesses the food and returns it to devotees now acting as patients. Just as transactions of gifts in the social life of Sikhs have the function of establishing new relations and expressing old ones, the Guru Granth Sahib and devotees are linked together as subjects in ritual exchanges of food.<sup>307</sup>

Already in the 1920s Mauss presented his theory of “gift exchange” by using examples from a wide range of societies. Mauss saw the obligation to give, receive and return gifts as a system which created social bonds between the persons exchanging gifts. The items exchanged are not seen as simple commodities, but gifts given are personified as things in the sense that they embody the substance and nature of the donor. Acts of exchanging gifts were actually acts of exchanging essences and substances between oneself and someone else. In effect transactions of gifts are inevitably producing a synthesis between two social alters, otherwise objectively separated, to express a social relationship. Those who participate in exchanges of gifts become

<sup>307</sup> In wedding ceremonies, for instance, the exchange of various types of gifts between the bride's and the groom's families are the ritual means to publicly confirm the announcement of a wedding and a new ties between two families (See Myrvold 2004a).

involved with each other.<sup>308</sup> Gifts exchanged are the physical mediums to objectify transactions between two or more subjects and serve to “thingify” social relationship.<sup>309</sup> Well aware of that the Guru Granth Sahib cannot receive or eat food in any physical sense, the Sikhs conceive the scripture as a subject person with capacities to accept and return gifts. The very existence of food offerings presumes that the text is socially alive.

What *prashad* is to individual Sikhs depends ultimately upon internal dispositions of the receivers, although locals will utilize a range of anthropomorphic analogies when explaining the practice of preparing and distributing sacred food: *prashad* is spoken of as leftovers symbolically digested by the Guru and “tasted” (*jutha*) with saliva. Foods which in ordinary social situations have been in physical contact with the mouth or feet of humans would be perceived as sources of filth and pollution and create distances in social interactions. In the devotional context, however, the symbolic touch or taste of the Guru charges the food with spiritual virtues and values, which devotees can acquire through their own partaking. An elderly attendant in the gurdwara said, “The Guru hungers for devotion. *Karah prashad* is like a blessing of the Guru. It acquires and transmits power. When you eat *karah prashad* you take part of that blessing.” Being offered to the Guru, *karah prashad* becomes a materialized or “thingified” blessing or essence residues of the Guru transmitted to devotees for ingestion.

In relation to ordinary food which creates distances in ordinary social interactions, *prashad* establishes asymmetrical relations of exchange and hierarchal distance between the divine agent and humans.<sup>310</sup> The public distribution of *karah prashad* also relates to human subjects who are otherwise separate. By accepting substances of the Guru from the same bowl devotees do not merely express a common identity as disciples, but share feelings and social events for which the food offering was conducted. This is evident when Sikhs present the Guru with a supplication and *karah prashad* for the aim of relieving a sick person. By collectively ingesting small parts of food offered in the name of the afflicted, people will say they “share the pain” in sense of sharing feelings and expressing empathy with the sick. The idea that one shares spaces, things and actions is central to the Sikh view of life and to mix and share food substances is a means to create relatedness with the Guru and other human subjects.

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<sup>308</sup> Mauss 1954. In later years, a number of scholars have sought to understand the role of objects in social life by focusing on exchanges of secular and religious objects and how cultural meanings of things are constituted (see e.g. Appadurai 1986, Jeudy Ballini & Juillerat 2002).

<sup>309</sup> Ellen 1988. The beliefs and practices of food transactions between divine agents and worshippers in the Hindu tradition have been thoroughly discussed in scholarly literature (see e.g. references in Babb 1983).

<sup>310</sup> Babb 1975.

## A JURIDICAL PERSON

Perhaps the most illustrative case in point of the Sikh attribution of personhood to the Guru Granth Sahib is the official recognition of the text as a “juridical person” with legal rights to receive donations presented by devotees and possess land properties.<sup>311</sup> In Varanasi Guru Nanak and Guru Tegh Bahadur are officially registered at the Municipal Corporation as the legal chieftains (*malik*) of the two main gurdwaras, while people maintain that the Guru Granth Sahib owns rooms and buildings of other Sikh sanctuaries. The scripture’s right of ownership is clear: objects once given to a gurdwara, including the building itself and the land on which it stands, becomes sacred objects by virtue of being offered to the human Gurus or the Guru Granth Sahib.

In December 1999 the scripture’s legal authority attracted attention in the local press and public discourses in Varanasi when the Sikhs by force took over an Udasin temple adjacent to Nichibagh Gurdwara. The disputed temple enshrined an icon of Sri Chand, the son of Guru Nanak, and had earlier belonged to a local priest of the Udasin tradition. In 1997 the property was sold to a businessman with plans to construct a large shopping center on the spot. The Sikh gurdwara committee in Varanasi opposed the plan, claiming that the deal was illegal since the Udasin temple officially belonged to the Sikh Guru, that is, the scripture. The case was consequently taken to court. In 1999, however, a group of Sikhs decided to take the matter into their own hands when it came to their knowledge that an old handwritten manuscript of the Guru Granth Sahib had been kept in the temple without due care and attention. One December morning about a hundred Sikhs rushed into the Udasin temple and pulled down the wall separating the temple from the Sikh gurdwara. Immediately they staged an unbroken reading of the scripture (*Akhand path*) inside the building and put up the Sikh flag (*Nishan Sahib*) to mark the Guru’s proprietorship, while local authorities summoned military police to prevent any outbreak of violence. Although the Sikh gurdwara eventually lost the case after revived negotiations, the public discourses that followed the litigations paid attention to the fact that the Sikh scripture could be a “legal owner” of the Udasin temple and lay the same juridical claims of ownership to land properties as human subjects.<sup>312</sup> In other words, the Guru Granth Sahib was legally a “person”.

In March 2000 the legal right of the text gained national approval when the Supreme Court of India decreed that Guru Granth Sahib is a “juristic person” who can

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<sup>311</sup> That various communities on the Indian subcontinent have incorporated religious sanctuaries and objects with the legal system of humans is not a new phenomenon. Gregory Schopen, for instance, observes that from the first century B.C. Buddhists were treating a *stupa* or a reliquary as a legal “person” that could possess land properties and monasteries. The collection of relics contained in a *stupa* was believed to manifest an enduring presence of the Buddha, which provided the relics legal rights to own properties in the human world (Schopen 1997: 128 – 134).

<sup>312</sup> The local Hindi papers verified that the Sikh scripture was indeed registered as the legal owner of the temple complex (*Amar Ujala*, 1999-12-15; *Gandiv*, 1999-12-15).

hold and use property that has been given in acts of charity. The verdict was the outcome of a legal dispute over land properties between local villagers in Patiala and the SGPC. While villagers claimed the land was their ancestral property, the SGPC alleged it belonged to the Sikh scripture and a local gurdwara. When the Punjab and Haryana High Court initially declared that Guru Granth Sahib cannot be granted the status of a “juristic person”, the SGPC successfully appealed to the Supreme Court. In an explanatory statement the Supreme Court alleged that Sikh perceptions of Guru Granth Sahib justified the resolution to consider the text a legal person. Arguments against the proposition highlighted that if Guru Granth Sahib indeed was to be treated as a “juristic person” the scripture could also sue or be sued. In response the Supreme Court clarified that the Sikh scripture can act as a legal person only through human representatives, whose acts will be treated within the range of law. Human custodians of the text would hence work like its legal guardians. Notably the verdict specified that the status of a juristic person would not be assigned all scriptures, but only those which are properly installed in gurdwaras and thereby treated by the Sikhs as a living Guru.<sup>313</sup> The following section of this chapter will particularly focus on how contemporary Sikhs in Varanasi create the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib by means of arranging spaces and performing ritual acts.

## 2.2. SACRED SPACES AND DEVOTIONAL ACTS

When religious specialists and community members are to verbally articulate their motives for performing various acts and ceremonies in the gurdwara they quite often recourse to brief statements, like it is “to give respect” (*sanman dena*), “for respect” (*saman ke lie*), “because of respect” (*satkar*), or sometimes say it is for “veneration” (*shraddha*). These acts of reverence are constrained by the presence of Guru Granth Sahib for reasons that appear self-evident to local Sikhs: “You have to give respect to Guru Granth Sahib because it is the present Guru... servants do the same to a king... it is for respect,” one of the local *granthis* once put it in plain words. Similar concise statements emanate from values and perceptions related to the scripture, which are more often reflected in devotional behaviors of gurdwara visitors, rather than being articulated words in conversations.

In order to understand how local Sikhs perceive the Guru Granth Sahib and the space of a gurdwara, one must take into consideration these nonverbal activities and firstly the spatial features, that is, the ways in which physical places are manipulated and transformed into sacred spaces by means of action and symbols. It is through the dynamic organization and designation of particular locations in the gurdwaras considered pure and sacred that the Sikhs construct a religiously significant environment. Equally important is the temporal aspects, in other words, how Sikhs mould ceremonies and ritualized acts to create experiences of a daily royal court around the

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<sup>313</sup> *The Times of India*, 2000-04-03; *The Tribune*, 2000-04-03.

Guru. In a practice-oriented approach to ritualized acts, Bell (1992) has elaborated how bodily acts and gestures of humans who are moving about within a specially constructed space actually project and define the cultural-specific qualities that is ordering that space, and simultaneously re-embody the same cultural values and schemes. The space created by humans impresses itself on them. Within this space people may experience sacredness and respond to the environment as if nonhuman forces, such as God or the religious tradition had shaped it, at the same time as they deploy and embody the schemes for creating this space through bodily movements.<sup>314</sup> The advantage of this approach, here insolently summarized, is that it moves away from a rather static view of human activities as mere expression or communication of latent religious beliefs to instead look upon action as a means to construct meanings and reproduce religious systems.

The sacred world of a gurdwara is a space continually re-created by local Sikhs. Through culturally prescribed and learnt gestures and acts conducted within its temporal and spatial dimensions people both generate and integrate religious experiences and notions of presence and supreme authority of the Guru Granth Sahib. When Sikhs thus are re-enacting acts inside the gurdwara they do not merely communicate messages about their individual or collective perceptions of a scripture, but in the enactment of these acts mould meanings, values and ideologies. Following the theory of Gell (1998), the arrangement of spaces and action within the gurdwara can be approached as “external” and “internal” strategies by which devotees imply and confer “social agency” to the Guru embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>315</sup>

## THE HOUSE OF THE GURU

In schoolbooks and other readable literature intended for a non-Sikh audience one quite often comes across statements saying that the gurdwara is the “temple” or “place of worship” of the Sikhs. These and similar simplified explanations are certainly correct, in the sense that the word *gurdwara* designates the primary sanctuary of Sikhs where religious worship and services take place, but they are far from doing justice to the more evocative descriptions and significances the Sikhs may attribute to the term. In a literal sense, gurdwara means the “door”, “threshold”, “abode”, or “seat” (*dwara*) of the Guru, that is, a place defined by the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and not by the physical building surrounding it. In the early Sikh community the word used to signify the place where disciples of the Sikh Gurus gathered for devotional singing and recitation in congregational worship was called *dharamsala*, or “the house of dharma” and later replaced with gurdwara.<sup>316</sup> The reasons for the shift

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<sup>314</sup> Bell 1992.

<sup>315</sup> Gell 1998.

<sup>316</sup> At the turn of the seventeenth century, Bhai Gurdas wrote: “The true Guru Nanak Dev inspired people to remember the true name of the Lord whose form is truth. Founding *dharamsala*, the place of dharma, at Kartarpur, it was inhabited by the holy congregation as the abode of

of nomenclature and the time for its incorporation in common parlance remain a cloudy matter, although it appears reasonably that the term gurdwara successively gained currency in the eighteenth century after the scripture had been invested spiritual authority in the community and the concept of the devotional assembly of Sikhs as an embodiment of the Guru's presence was fully developed.<sup>317</sup> The new denomination came to specify that the essential feature of Sikh sacred space is the presiding presence of a Guru-scripture and mediation of *gurbani*.

Considering that a gurdwara can be erected practically at any house the primary reason for constructing a public place of worship lies in the importance of keeping *sangat*, or "congregation", equally commonly referred to as *sadhsang*, "the congregation of saintly persons" or *satsang*, "the congregation of true people". In the North Indian Bhakti traditions the notion of keeping *satsang* is regarded as an important aspect of the devotional life: by being present and actively participate in gatherings of likeminded devotees and saintly people (*sadh*), the spiritual qualities and virtues of the corporate is believed to leave an impression on the individual person. From the inception of Sikhism the discipline of *sangat*, either in presence of the Guru or in company with co-disciples, has been a soteriological cornerstone in the Sikh teaching and practices. Although the pursuits of spiritual merits ultimately depend upon the individual seeker, the assembly of true people constitutes the most favorable environment for praising God and safeguards the Gurus' teaching from false doctrines and misleadings.<sup>318</sup>

When my respondents in Varanasi were inquired to explain the term gurdwara in simple wordings, most preferred to describe it as the "house of the Guru" (*Gurughar*), or the "place of God" (*Bhagwan ka sthan*). More circumstantial indigenous definitions make it possible to distinguish between three basic institutional categories of gurdwaras, of which the first category is defined by a relationship to the Sikh history, the second is community-based gurdwaras only for congregational worship, and the third identifies a space created at various spatio-temporal locations only for the performance of ceremonies.

Contemporary Sikhs generally differentiate between buildings that have been constructed on a site or location to commemorate the human Gurus and the Sikh history, and gurdwaras that do not bear any particular relation to the past but are constructed only for congregational worship. The first category, which claims to bear some kind of reference to history, is labelled "historical" (*itihāsik*) and subsumes a

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truth" (Jodh Singh, 1998: 63). The seventeenth century *janam-sakhi* literature, which traces the geographical spread of Guru Nanak's teaching, describes how followers of the Guru established *dharamsalas* at various locations to congregate for devotional singing and reciting the divine name (See McLeod 1980a).

<sup>317</sup> See Mann 2005. As McLeod observes, the early *rahitnama* literature from the eighteenth century used the terms *dharamsala* and *gurdwara* synonymously to a varying degree, and later adopted the latter nomenclature for the Sikh places of worship (McLeod 2003: 227 – 229).

<sup>318</sup> As an elderly Sikh man said: "If ten people get together and start to gossip and condemn each other it would not be a *satsangat*."



large number of sites and buildings both inside and outside the state of Punjab. Each of these gurdwaras has a meaningful tale to unfold and often preserve relics, such as clothes, shoes, weapons, letters, that have belonged to the Gurus or their family members, to substantiate historicity and confirm spatial sanctity.

In consideration of which history these places commemorate, the category of *itihāsik* gurdwaras can be subdivided into a least three different types. The first, and definitely the most important, are sites that in one way or another testify a direct connection with the everyday life and peculiar events in the lives of the historical Sikh Gurus. Acknowledged places at which the Gurus were born, grew up, resided, meditated, got married, fought battles, worked miracles, met and debated with royalties, yogis, pandits and other contemporaries, died and were cremated, are identified locations to make up the sacred geography of the Sikhs. These historical sites evoke stories transmitted by oral and textual narrative traditions and often bear references to the corporeal and transcendental nature of the Gurus.<sup>319</sup> Blessed and sanctified by the Gurus' presences and deeds, they make destinations of pilgrimages and accommodate natural and architectural monuments – trees, wells, hot springs, ponds, gardens and the like – that are objects for veneration. A significant number of the historical gurdwaras are believed to reciprocate rituals acts performed by devotees, such as prayers, *gurbani* recitations, donations, and bathing, with spiritual merits and relief from various kinds of bodily afflictions. The two main gurdwaras in Varanasi at Gurubagh and Nichibagh claim this legitimacy and accommodate sacred spaces believed to be “seats” on which Nanak and Tegh Bahadur meditated and worked wonders.

The second type of *itihāsik* gurdwaras is the building founded in reminiscence of virtuous Sikh disciples, who met or lived close with the human Gurus and were given authority to perform certain honorable deeds.<sup>320</sup> In Varanasi the combined gurdwara and Sanskrit school of *Shri Chetan Math* in charge of the Nirmala panth stands in memory of Bhai Gurdas' visit to the city. Equally significant are places honoring the self-sacrificing martyrs who spilled their blood for the righteous cause of upholding justice and protecting religion. There is no sanctuary of this kind located in the district of Varanasi, but all the more are dotted about in the sacred geography of the Punjab.<sup>321</sup>

Another and third type are historical gurdwaras that work like relic-shrines, built for the purpose of preserving and venerating objects that have been blessed or physically touched by the Gurus. These objects can be handwritten manuscripts or

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<sup>319</sup> *Sis Ganj Gurdwara* in Delhi, for instance, venerates the spot on which Tegh Bahadur's head fell down when the Moguls decapitated him, whereas the site on mountain *Hemkunt Sahib*, is believed to be the place at which Gobind Singh meditated (*tapashya*) before God ordained him to take a human birth and enter the world.

<sup>320</sup> Many of the Sikh scribes and officiators in the early community have a shrine in their name, like *Gurdwara Tap Asthan Baba Buddha Ji* and *Gurdwara Samadhan* at Ramdas (Amritsar) which are dedicated to Baba Buddha.

<sup>321</sup> For instance, *Baba Deep Singh Ji Shaheed Gurdwara* at Amritsar commemorates Baba Deep Singh's martyrdom during the war against the Afghani invaders in the eighteenth century.

letters, marked with Gurus' handwriting, or personal belongings like clothes, swords, sandals, and other personal requisites, such as Gurus' *dattan*, the bark used for cleaning the teeth. The custodian gurdwara may claim that the Guru intentionally presented a gift to his devotees for the purpose of being commemorated, or more randomly lost or dropped a personal object when he passed by. The former is the case with the *Gurdwara Guru Gobind Singh Ji Daskhati Sahib* in Ahraura outside Varanasi which is named after a handwritten scripture believed to enshrine Gobind Singh's signature (*Daskhati*). The relic was initially kept in private custody and later displaced to a gurdwara constructed only for veneration of the signature. Historical places like this do not necessarily allege the physical presence of a Guru at a particular location, but commemorate and provide *darshan* of material objects which the Gurus in some way or another touched.

Given the significance of holding congregations in Sikhism, the Sikhs have established community based gurdwaras wherever they have travelled and settled down. This second category of gurdwaras may be historical in the sense of being old, but they are in no particular way related to memorable events in the Sikh history. Gurdwaras erected solely for congregational worship are generally termed *Sangat Sahib*, "the respected congregation", or *Singh Sabha*, referring to a society or "association" (*sabha*) of Singhs, and not to be confused with the Sikh reform movement in the late nineteenth century. Community gurdwaras can be constructed for a Sikh assembly in a particular geographical area – in a town, an urban neighborhood, a village, or at a railway junction – or be designed for the professional or working community who built it.

In Varanasi, Sikh students and teachers related to Benares Hindu University established their own gurdwara for the academic community of Sikhs, while workers employed by Diesel Locomotive Works in the outskirts of the city likewise set up *Singh Sabha Gurdwara* for Sikh families within the industrial estate. In a similar fashion, military regiments in India accommodated gurdwaras in cantonments and units for Sikh members of the armed forces.<sup>322</sup> Yet another example of a community based house of the Guru is the domestic gurdwaras set up in the individual or joint household for family members and relatives. Among the respondents in my structured interviews, eleven Sikh and Sindhi families had constructed a gurdwara for domestic worship in special-made rooms or sections of their houses, either on the upper floor

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<sup>322</sup> The custom of providing regimental gurdwaras to Sikh soldiers and officers was already established during the *Khalsa raj* of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the nineteenth century, and further developed by the British after the annexation of Punjab in 1849 and the recruitment of Sikhs to the Native and Colonial Armies. Today a gurdwara will be found in every military unit of the Indian force in which Sikh soldiers and officers are employed. If a unit consists of more than fifty Sikhs it is required to employ a *granthi* for performance of daily services and custodianship of the Guru Granth Sahib. In the case of warfare a separate vehicle will transport the Guru Granth Sahib to the main base in the field where a temporary gurdwara is constructed in a separate tent. Information provided by Captain Gurmej Singh Bajwa, Jalandhar, November 2006.

or on the roof terrace. One family had converted a whole garage into a place for Guru Granth Sahib, and in another family with less living space an outdoor balcony had been enclosed with walls and windows to provide a room for the Guru. Local Sikhs are of the strong opinion that domestic gurdwaras should always stand on freehold and never in rentals where people are circulating. As I will return to below, families are scrupulous about keeping these accommodations clean and giving the scripture a proper ministration to secure the dignity and respect which the Guru is entitled.

In addition to the aforementioned examples of relatively permanent establishments, a gurdwara can be established anywhere provided the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, or, to put it differently, wherever the scripture is ceremonially installed a gurdwara exists. Temporal gurdwaras are often erected for a limited period of time in family houses, shops or at other places especially when families are arranging *Akhand path*, the 48-hours unbroken reading of the whole scripture, in connection with major festivals and family events. Although Sikhs put a great deal of effort in decorating the space around their Guru, the minimal requirement of a temporal gurdwara is a clean room that provides a seat with palanquin and robes for installation of the Guru Granth Sahib.

To confine the signification of a gurdwara to the aforesaid institutional meanings would still be to exclude the diverse perceptions, emotions, and experiences people charge the word with. A gurdwara is the place where the most significant life events occur in the presence of the Guru – one meets a life-partner, gets married, and eventually will bid farewell to the social life after death. One woman said she had “heard” divine words speaking to her in the gurdwara and was blessed with a pregnancy as a result of insistent prayers for a son. The space of the gurdwara is believed to manifest a divine presence, within which humans feel they engage and communicate with God and share these religious experiences with others. It is noteworthy that all of my respondents associated the term gurdwara with peace (*shant*) or asserted they had experienced an inner feeling of peace within that space. In extremely humble terms, a Sikh woman in her twenties said:

A gurdwara is the medium to get in touch with God, where I realize that there is someone who is much greater than me. That is the place where God listens to all, even small creatures like ants. The place forces arrogant people to bow.

Though some respondents would promptly add that communication with God is not restricted to manmade edifices in the material world, but a divine presence exists everywhere, within us and especially in the devotional assembly of people who are singing and meditating upon the divine name. Utilizing a rather philosophical parable, a fifty-year-old Sikh businesswoman said the gurdwara building is merely a microcosmic model, or a replica, of the divine domicile that humans store within

them. Just as the space of a gurdwara building is permeated with sacred words, so should the inner temple of humans be filled with the Guru's words and teaching.<sup>323</sup>

Among local Sikhs the significance of attending a gurdwara is firmly embedded in the emic notion of seeking *darshan*, the "sight" of Guru Granth Sahib and the devotional congregation of Sikhs. The majority of my interlocutors stated that *darshan* of the Guru enshrined in the scripture is a primary reason for visiting a gurdwara and one of the more important acts to conduct in their daily worship. An elderly Sikh woman, for example, explained her personal motives for attendance in the following way:

All the ten Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib ji are in the *gurdwara*. The Gurus want their children to come to them. If the children are coming with wishes they will fulfil these wishes. The Gurus want them to get rid of this cycle of birth and death...to get *moksh*. Many people go there to express wishes, like if someone wants to have a baby. I am not going there for these reasons... I only go to take *darshan* of the ten Gurus.

In devotional contexts of the Indian religious traditions of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains the notion of *darshan* generally implies the auspicious exchange of sight between a devotee and a deity or human attributed supramundane qualities. At home or in the temple a devotee will approach the consecrated image of a god or goddesses to actively see and "take" auspicious sight emanating from the superior being, who returns the gaze to the worshipper. The mutual gazing is a basic devotional act, believed to establish human-divine interactions.<sup>324</sup> It is not merely a visual registration of a superior's presence, but a transactional act through which sight is exchanged and the inferior viewer is imparted blessings and shares of the properties of the object seen.

Local Sikhs frequently recur to this pan-Indian understanding of *darshan* when describing their daily worship of making obeisance to the scripture enthroned in the

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<sup>323</sup> Similar verbal expositions can often be traced back to textual references in the figurative language of the Sikh scripture itself. In compositions of the Gurus the term *gurdwara* does not refer to a specific place of worship but is a puzzling metaphor for the spiritual transition or threshold of the Guru's teaching as a way to obtain the divine name (*Nam*) and knowledge in order to open up the door of liberation (see e.g. GGS: 153, 616, 730, 930, 1015). Guru Nanak frequently utilizes the image of a door in different contexts, such as "the door of liberation" (*mukh duar*), and "the tenth door" (*das duar*), for the abode of God and the ultimate stage in the spiritual development of humans. When the "tenth door" is opened the guru-oriented person will attain liberation (see e.g. GGS: 159, 1033, 1040, 1331). The term *gurdwara*, on the other hand, more often signifies the means by which humans reach this final destination, i.e., the Guru as the divine words and name.

<sup>324</sup> For an overview of *darshan* in the Hindu worship, consult Eck 1981. In an anthropological analysis on *darshan*, Gell discusses consecration rituals of applying "eyes" to icons and apotheosised humans in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Gell 1998). For a detailed analysis of how Buddhists in Thailand imbue images of the Buddha with the knowledge of the dhamma teaching and actual empowerment of the images, see Swearer 2004.

gurdwara, or when they visit Sikh pilgrimage sites in the Punjab or elsewhere. By attending the gurdwara they say they take the auspicious sight of the Guru, dwelling in the body of Guru Granth Sahib and the holy congregation (*satsang*). Since the scripture is an abode of divine words and not an iconic representation of God, the notion of *darshan* has been extended to include a combined visual and aural reception of *gurbani* in script and sound.<sup>325</sup> "People think this [the *gurdwara*] is the place of Guru, but the Word (*shabad*) is the Guru. Reading and listening to the *shabad* is to take *darshan* of the Guru," a Sikh man in his early twenties rectified, in his view, a common Hinduized "misconception" of *darshan* among co-devotees. If one imagines the setting of a gathering around a living human Guru, the attending devotee would see the physical appearance of the preceptor, hear his teaching in speech, and probably apprehend it as an incontestable truth. Similar sensory and cognitive experiences appropriated with the *shabad*-Guru dwelling within the scripture are not beset with perplexities from a devotionalist perspective. In one Sikh family in Varanasi the woman of the house used to sing a *gurbani* hymn praising the "*darshan* of God" she received after having opened Guru Granth Sahib in the morning liturgy at the domestic gurdwara. For her, the notion of *darshan* comprised the act of viewing inscribed words inside the unwrapped folio when she was reading, and the act of hearing these words in sound during her morning recitations. A recitation of *gurbani* by reading the Gurmukhi script and hearing through verbal pronunciations is "to take *darshan*" of the true Guru. Moreover, the aural/oral and visual experience of *gurbani* in script through readings (or "seeing" phonetic construction of memorized *gurbani* texts) should ideally include the devotional component of acquiring knowledge and teaching residing in the scripture, and not just a mechanical repetition or scanning of written signs. In this context the idiom of *darshan* is interpreted as a type of reception of divine knowledge that the Guru bestows the pious who attentively engage in the scriptural words.<sup>326</sup> The appearance of the *shabad*-Guru within the text ultimately depends upon the devotional stance of the individual worshipper. Thus, to take *darshan* of the Guru in Guru Granth Sahib does not necessarily involve a visual attachment to the physical scripture in the first place, but a "hearing" and "seeing" (i.e., acquisition) of instructions from the Guru, that is, the divine words preserved in the text. Like exchanges of sight, this type of *darshan* is a two-fold affair between the Guru and disciple that will result in the mergence of the two. Devotional gatherings in presence of the scripture in a gurdwara are considered to provide the most favourable setting for acquisition of this guidance and knowledge.

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<sup>325</sup> Dusenbery briefly mentions that Sikhs perceive *darshan* as the both sight and sound of Guru Granth Sahib, or "the *darshan* of the Word", although he does not relate his discussion to the sight of script (reading) in recitations of *gurbani* (Dusenbery 1992: 394).

<sup>326</sup> Gonda traces the combination of seeing and acquiring knowledge back to the Vedic tradition, according to which divine knowledge is compared to sight and considered as "an extraordinary faculty" for acquisition of knowledge (Gonda 1963: 22). In many Buddhist traditions receiving *darshan* of physical dharma texts have been considered an act to partake of the teaching contained in the texts (see Kinnard 1999).

## ARRANGING SPACES

The two main gurdwaras in Varanasi hold a complexity of buildings and rooms which serve different purposes. The older edifice of Nichibagh is a quadrangle surrounded by a three-storied building with one main entrance and which stores the inner sanctum on the first floor, rest house (*dharamsala*) for employees and pilgrims on the second floor, and the communal kitchen and dining hall on the roof. The sanctuary consists of a square-shaped hall that has a high ceiling and a semilunar balcony that can be reached from the second floor. The modern structure of Gurubagh has two main entrances leading in to a rectangular courtyard with the main hall and a small garden. Several buildings seal the courtyard: on one side is the three-storied *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* fronted by a large playground. Equally high buildings contain the communal kitchen, halls for public distribution of food, and the hospital with offices and wards framing another side. A large number of quarters for employees, pilgrims and visiting performers are scattered within the gurdwara complex.<sup>327</sup> The gurdwara hall in Gurubagh has been built as a separate rectangular building encircled by a walkway for circumambulations. The hall has windows and doors on all four sides and two indoor-balconies along the left and right hand sides. Both gurdwaras have rooms for storing shoes (*juta ghar*) close to the main entrances, as well as washbasins and lower tubs for washing feet before entering the sanctuary. The courtyards hold whiteboards on which the daily divine order (*Hukam*) is written, and other notice boards with information about daily liturgies, auspicious days of the Vikrami month and festivals according to the Sikh calendar.

A salient feature of the courtyard scene is *Nishan Sahib*, the triangular shaped flag printed with the Sikh emblem *deg-h-tagh-fateh* (cauldron-sword-victory), popularly called the *khanda* sign, which comprises the circular Chakkar and the double-edged sword surrounded by two daggers and is said to combine the ideal of charity with that of justice and victory in battles. The Sikh flag flies from the top of a tall steel pole wrapped in cloth covering (*chola*) in saffron color and adorned with a large steel sign of the double-edged sword on top.<sup>328</sup> To all appearance the *Nishan Sahib* was created as a military standard in the eighteenth century. Wherever Sikhs establish gurdwaras today the flag will be one of the first symbols they erect outside the main shrine and religious premises. Similar to Sikh architecture in other regions, the poles of *Nishan Sahib* in Varanasi are supported by ornamental plinths in white marble and thick steel wires. The pole in Gurubagh Gurdwara is about 33.5 meters high and the one in Nichibagh 32 meters. Although local Sikhs attribute the standard many meanings, it is often held to represent Sikh sovereignty and the Guru's proprietorship of the place at which it stands. Upon visiting the gurdwara it is customarily to bow in front of the pole and sometimes people decorate the stand with flowers and candles. A *granthi*

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<sup>327</sup> Pilgrims may stay in the gurdwara for three days free of charge.

<sup>328</sup> *Nishan Sahib* also refers to the portable standard used in processions. It is interesting to note that both cloth-relics of the human Gurus and the covering of *Nishan Sahib* are given the same name – *chola*.

said that people pay respect to *Nishan Sahib* because it is the insignia of the Guru, who is inviting them the Guru's house: "They think that Guru Maharaj is calling... it moves like this [gesticulating with his hands]... it is inviting: come, come, here you will get *langar*, here you will get everything." In connection with *sangrand*, the first day of the Vikrami month, and the festivals commemorating the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh local Sikhs remove the saffron-colored costume of the pole and re-dress it in new coverings.



The *Sukhasan* ceremony at Nichibagh Gurdwara.

The focal point of the gurdwara is naturally Guru Granth Sahib itself, placed on a royal throne (*takht*) at the center of the main hall where the congregation assembles.<sup>329</sup> In Nichibagh Gurdwara the scriptural dais consists of a large white marble dome decorated with ornamental flowers and *khanda* signs painted in fresco and which has capacity to accommodate three scriptures at the same time. The throne in Gurubagh Gurdwara provides a seat for one scripture and is made of a marble palanquin (*palki*), built on a larger platform, and embellished with a golden spire on the top. Through daily ceremonies the scripture is enthroned on the seat, covered with plain white cloths as a bottom sheet, and adorned with cushions and robes (*rumala*)

<sup>329</sup> The lectern or string-bed (*manji*) on which Guru Granth Sahib is placed should at minimum be 90 cm wide and 45 cm deep, and raised at least 30 cm from ground level. The bed should have webbing made of natural fibres and a wooden framing.

on the top that are adjusted to the season. Over the throne two canopies (*chandoa*) embroidered with Sikh symbols and *gurbani* verses are placed: a larger one is hanging below the ceiling and a small canopy is fastened inside the rounded frame of the dome. Each morning the throne is dusted and polished, and every second day in the night the scriptural attires are exchanged with clean and new robes, donated by some community member. During the summer the throne will be dressed in cooler silk or nylon and in the winter coated with cotton or woollen robes. In the cold season the Sikhs will put an extra thick blanket over Guru Granth Sahib to protect the installed scripture from the cold.

Beside the scriptural seat lies a whisk (*chaur*) made of yak hair or nylon in metal or wooden handle, which the *granthi* or other attendants use for waving over the scripture. In the Indian culture swaying a whisk over the head of a sovereign or deity has by tradition been a core symbolic act to pay homage and testify supreme authority in both secular and religious contexts. In Sikh worship a similar practice has been adopted to create and simultaneously confirm the sovereign status of the Gurus' composition and Guru Granth Sahib. At times when the Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) is read and public recitations from the scripture begin or end, one member of the congregation will stand behind the throne to sway the whisk horizontally, back and forward, in graceful movements over the head of the reciter and Guru Granth Sahib. During major festivals the *granthi* is said to do "service of the Guru" (*gurseva*) by sitting on the throne for a whole day repeating the waving act. In the daily run, however, anyone visiting the gurdwara, including non-Sikhs, may take up the whisk to sway it a couple of times over the scriptural corpus as a gesture of veneration articulated in bodily acts.

In front of the throne in both gurdwaras a lower wooden fence encloses a rectangular space that defines a distance between the scripture and visitors, and which contains paraphernalia that mainly serve decorative purposes, such as statuettes in brass or steel portraying the *khanda* or *ik omkar* signs, flower bouquets, and swords that are termed "attributes" of the Guru. The decorations evoke an ethos of an attending Guru and heighten the solemnity of gatherings in presence of the text. The fenced area also accommodates two small tables on which food and clothes offerings to the scripture are placed. Any object placed on the throne and in the physical presence of the scripture – like flowers or clothes – is assumed to have "touched the Guru's feet" and hence will be treated as sanctified objects that bring blessings. Through the intimate contact with the scripture objects are believed to attain generative properties. When services are held people commonly pay tribute by offering flower garlands to the seat and as a counter-gift in return receive another garland that has been lying on the throne for some time and transformed its properties. Because the royal seat of Guru Granth Sahib represents an abode of authority it is subject to acts of reverence and worship even at times when the scripture is not installed. At the time of festival days, for instance, it is customary to gather in front of the seat after the scripture has been removed and put to rest for the night. Headed by a portable standard a group of devotees will sing *gurbani* hymns while slowly circumambulating the throne and



*Nishan sahib* in the courtyard, and eventually conclude the homage by calling out the Sikh ovation before the throne. In these acts the throne or “seat” is honoured, in absence of Guru Granth Sahib, for its daily function of hosting the Guru-scripture.

The design and location of the throne is arranged in a way to underscore the authority of the scripture and absorb the attention of worshippers. The construction of the platform fixes the scriptural seat to an elevated position in the immediate visual field of the congregation at the end of the room. The throne is placed far enough away from the surrounding wall to make it possible for devotees to perform circumambulation. Visiting devotees are expected to sit down on the ground in a lower position with their bodies turned towards Guru Granth Sahib to articulate the common condition as servants seeking audience with a superior Guru. According to a general principle, the scriptures should always be placed on a higher position than human devotees, or humans should place themselves lower than the scripture and never turn the back to the book. To forge a common identity as inferior disciples subordinate to the Guru, sitting on cushions, chairs or in any other distinctive position in presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and within the congregation is not permitted. By traditional rules the space of the congregation is normally divided into two equally large gender-based areas: facing the throne men sit to the right while women assemble to the left, and the two zones are separated by a central walkway. The spatial gender division is by no means a stringent rule – men and women may and quite often do sit side by side in worship – but serves more as a guiding norm, especially during crowded gatherings.

Irrespective of the motives or intentions people may have for visiting the gurdwara, the minimal constitutive act of paying homage to Guru Granth Sahib is to perform *matha tekna*, the bodily act of going down on one’s knees and bowing deeply until the forehead touches the ground. In social situations of everyday life *matha tekna* usually refers to the symbolic act of touching the feet of elders or other esteemed persons in order to salute and pay reverence.<sup>330</sup> In the gurdwara it is a humble act of submitting oneself by the letting the highest part the human body – the forehead – touch the ground before the Guru-scripture. Before going into a gurdwara both men and women will first remove their socks and shoes, wash the hands and feet, and cover their head – women with shawls and men with handkerchiefs unless they wear turbans. This preliminary conditions and acts mark the transition to an area of greater purity and sanctity. Upon entering devotees may touch the threshold with their hands and in humble gestures take its “dust” and apply it on the forehead as a blessing, and then follow the concentric walkway made of a long carpet leading up to the

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<sup>330</sup> In Punjabi the reverential greeting by touching feet is also called *charan bandna*. The bodily act of *matha tekna* can be converted to a speech act when there is no possibility of physical interaction between two agents, such as when two persons pay respect in a conversation over phone. The speaker will then utter the words “*matha tekna*” which verbally substitutes the act of touching the feet.

immediate space in front of the scriptural throne.<sup>331</sup> Facing Guru Granth Sahib they will assume a formal posture of respect: they place the palms of their hands together and put a monetary offering in the donation box with the right hand,<sup>332</sup> sometimes in combination with the repetition of the divine name (*Vahiguru*) or a small prayer recited internally in silence or aloud, and then perform *matha tekna*. Some worshippers may even rub their forehead and nose (*matha ragarna*) against the ground before Guru Granth Sahib, walk around the scripture clockwise with the right shoulder facing the throne, and offer obedience to the scriptural seat on the backside by touching it and passing their hands to the forehead and heart. In any case *matha tekna* is the first and smallest obligatory act of reverence expected from all visitors in the Guru's house, whether they have arrived to present a prayer, listen to devotional music, prepare food in the communal kitchen, or just meet and converse with friends.<sup>333</sup> When men and women bring their infants to the gurdwara they often let the children lie on their face before the scripture for a couple of seconds in a reverential salutation analogous to the bowing. Like other ritual conducts the early practical training of *matha tekna* grow into an embodied practice and habit that children and adults quite unreflectively re-enact whenever they are attending the presence of the Guru. On daily visits the enactment of *matha tekna* is usually an individual activity. Worshippers are free to enter the gurdwara at any time during the day and act alone in front of the throne. Only when the Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) is performed during the morning and evening services, will the congregation do *matha tekna* in unison: while reading the last line of the *Ardas* text, which pays tribute to the name of Nanak and pleas for prosperity to the whole world, all participants will, from their respective location, at the same time go down on their knees, and facing Guru Granth Sahib touch the floor with their foreheads. When departing from the gurdwara the individual devotee may in a similar fashion repeat *matha tekna* in front of the throne or moderately bow towards the scripture before walking out.

The interior design of the two gurdwaras in Varanasi is well adjusted to the daily ceremonies to Guru Granth Sahib and recitations of the scripture. Both places have a special scriptural bedroom called *sachkhand*, literally "the realm of truth", which is furnished with a large four-poster bed with a canopy on top and electrical fans to cool the air in the hot summer season. All scriptures that are not enthroned for readings are kept in these beds, lying on white cushions covered with bedclothes suitable to the season.<sup>334</sup> The bedroom may also hold attributes of the human Sikh

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<sup>331</sup> It is quite common to see people lifting the doormat just outside the gurdwara entrance to collect the dust under it and take it to their eyes as a blessing.

<sup>332</sup> As in many other cultures the right hand is in general considered the pure and auspicious hand, with which one presents offerings and eat, in contrast to the left hand, which is used for toilet and other contaminating activities.

<sup>333</sup> On one occasion, when a drunken man roamed around in the gurdwara, instead of throwing the man out the *granthi* grabbed hold of the back of his neck and forced him to bow in front of the scripture, and then left the drunkard alone.

<sup>334</sup> Similar to the throne the clothes in the bedroom are changed every second day in daytime.

Gurus and weapons that have belonged to some devotee of the past and now are “in service” (*hazuri*) of the Guru. In the modern gurdwara hall of Gurubagh the bedroom for texts of the Guru Granth Sahib has been constructed on the second floor on the right side of the scriptural throne downstairs. The older structure of Nichibagh Gurdwara holds two bedrooms: one on the upper floor for old handwritten *gutkas* and manuscripts, whereas a recessed chamber in the bottom right-hand corner of the gurdwara hall on the first floor is utilized for custody of printed scriptures in daily use. According to the local lore this chamber points out the exact spot on which Guru Tegh Bahadur did meditation – *tapashya* – for seven months and thirteen days on his visit in Varanasi.

The term *sachkhand* also signifies the specific room for performances of unbroken readings (*Akhand path*) of the scripture in the gurdwara. Both gurdwaras of Gurubagh and Nichibagh hold these recitation rooms, which are well-separated spaces reserved on the left flank on the second floor to not disturb reciters or interrupt the daily programs. Similar to the throne in center of the gurdwaras, scriptures installed for readings in this room should be placed on a palanquin (*palki*) or a wooden stand underneath a canopy to be in a higher position than the reciter who sits on the floor. Since people visit the room to pay respect and offer monetary gifts to ongoing readings of the Guru-scripture, a large piece of cotton cloth and a donation box is usually placed in front of the throne. Unlike the customary adornment of scriptural spaces the recitation room is devoid of incense, swords, flowers or other symbols. Only fans and flashlights are kept in the otherwise bare rooms to prevent heat and frequent power cuts from interrupting readings. The lack of symbols is said to signify a space of tranquility and peace. For visitors *sachkhand* should provide a place where sensory impressions are restricted in favor of the sound of the divine words. Immediately outside the room cloths or straw mattresses are sometimes spread for those who want to squat down and listen to an ongoing recitation.

The symbolism of *sachkhand* is subject to diverse interpretations: it occurs in Guru Nanak’s composition *Japji Sahib*, in which he describes the five realms or abodes of humans’ spiritual development towards God.<sup>335</sup> Truth (*sach*) is both the epithet and characteristics of God. In line with a popular interpretation of this textual reference, *sachkhand* represents the last and final abode in which the guru-oriented person will ultimately unite with the divine and become god-like. It is a widespread belief that the Sikh Gurus, Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh in particular, had reached *sachkhand* and were released from the bounds of rebirths prior to their entrances in the world. Occasionally the notion of *sachkhand* also signifies the space wherein the congregation of true devotees (*sadh sangat*) gathers to recite and praise God. Within the gurdwaras, the physical place where scriptures are put to rest and unbroken readings of Guru Granth Sahib are conducted have been assigned similar religious meanings. In a symbolic sense the rooms represent worldly models of the idealized realm of truth, as both the means and end of spiritual progress; they provide pure and sac-

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<sup>335</sup> GGS: 7 - 8.

rosanct spaces in close presence of the Guru where only *gurbani* – the voice of the Guru – resounds. From the perspective of spatial uses in ritual performances, *sachkhand* is a “fixed-featured space” intentionally set aside for a particular function and by spatial norms affect the behavior of people.<sup>336</sup> Consistent with local conventions people are free to enter the recitations room to pay respect, but within this area no public speeches or acts other than those directly related to the performances of *Akhand path* should occur. Regarding the scriptural bedroom only *Amritdhari* Sikhs are allowed to cross the threshold of this room, since it designates a demarcated private and pure resting place for scriptures. Devotees will enter the room only for the purpose of bringing and putting scriptures to rest and cleaning in service of the Guru. On daily visits in the gurdwara, people will bow and touch the floor before the closed door to the room in which scriptures are reposing.

An equally significant space to be found inside a gurdwara is the kitchen and dining hall for the social and religious activity of distributing vegetarian food in the communal kitchen of the Guru (*Guru ka langar*). In Varanasi both of the gurdwaras keep separate kitchens equipped with large iron kettles (*deg*) for preparing rice and vegetable dishes, and boards for rolling and frying the customary thin flat bread (*roti*). The adjoining dining halls are large and unfurnished to provide enough space for the custom of sitting together in rows (*pangat*) on straw-mattresses when sharing meals. During an ordinary day the gurdwara normally serves three meals for employees, pilgrims, and other guests, and on festival days magnify the event of *langar* to a large feeding arrangement for the whole community.

### CREATING A DAILY COURT

The conceptualization of any gathering in the gurdwara are contained in two formal emic terms which reflect basic assumptions rooted in the ideological and historical background of Sikhism: the first one is *darbar* or “royal court”, and the other one is *divan*, which denotes a court or tribunal of justice. The two Persian loan words, originally drawn from the bureaucratic parlance of Muslim rulers, recur frequently in the compositions of the Sikh Gurus as metaphors signifying a divine abode or the ultimate spiritual stage of union with God.<sup>337</sup> In historical times the words were employed to designate spatial and temporal gatherings of disciples in presence of the human Gurus. The way contemporary local Sikhs have come to conceptualize the idiom of a court shows that it firstly signifies the physical presence of the eternal spiritual authority – Guru Granth Sahib – and the assembly of devotees gathered in attendance of the Guru-scripture, that is, the *satsang* or “the congregation of virtuous

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<sup>336</sup> Hall 1966: 103 – 112.

<sup>337</sup> In the metaphorical language of the Gurus, the court of God is characterized by truth and described as the place where the guru-oriented devotee is honoured and united with the divine (see e.g. GGS: 7, 142, 144, 355, 688, 751, 1241). The divine court is also portrayed as a tribunal of justice at which Dharmaraj administers justice on order of God and all humans have to account for their actions after death (GGS: 15, 38, 109, 1330).

people". To set up a place at which the scripture is installed on a throne is to establish and keep a royal court (*darbar*), wherever this may be spatialized in the physical geography.<sup>338</sup> Just like the historical human Gurus held courts and received their followers in audience, locals Sikhs today say, "the court will be in session" (*divan lagega*) or "the court will be conducted" (*darbar chalega*) when the Guru-scripture is to be ceremonially installed and made present at a particular time and space. In the ways of speaking, the *granthi* is the "minister" who during congregational ceremonies "sits at court" (*divan*) when he is placed behind the scripture to recite and wave the whisk in acts of respect. The Persian word *vazir* literally means "one who bears the office" and refers to a "minister" in the context of Islamic courts and officialdom. In the Sikh context the *granthi* is the religious "minister" of Guru Granth Sahib who holds a significant public office but still remains a servant of the ruler.

Figure 9.

#### DAILY LITURGIES IN THE GURDWARAS OF VARANASI

##### MORNING

###### *Prakash:*

- a. Greet the book
- b. Carry the book to the throne while reciting "Satnam Vahiguru"
- c. Unpack the robes and arrange the seat
- d. Place the book on the seat
- e. Greet the book
- f. Open the book and cover it with a robe
- Take and read the *Hukam*
- Recite *Sukhmani Sahib*
- Sing *Anand Sahib*, pauri 1-5, 40
- Read *Ardas*
- Distribute *karah prashad*
- Sing *Asa di Var*

##### EVENING

###### Sing *Rahiras Sahib*

- Sing *Arti*
- Perform *Kirtan*
- Sing *Anand Sahib*, pauri 1-5, 40
- Read *Ardas*
- Read the *Hukam*
- Distribute *karah prashad*
- Sukhasan:***
- a. Pack the book while reading
- Kirtan Sohila*
- b. Read *Choti Ardas*
- c. Carry the book to the bedroom in a procession
- d. Place the book on the bed and cover it with robes
- e. Sikh salutation

Bearing in mind that the Guru ultimately is the *bani* contained in a scriptural body, any assembly at which *gurbani* is mediated through readings or singing will establish a divine court. For instance, when Sikh musicians convey *gurbani* through music, they are said to hold *kirtan darbar* or a "court of praising", which certainly awakes associations to musical performances in the ancient courts of the Sikh Gurus. Just as the monarch's court and the judge's court are rooms and sessions that in secu-

<sup>338</sup> One informant said the *Darbar Sahib* at Amritsar is the "supreme court", in relation to other gurdwaras.

lar contexts confer dignity and power, the words *darbar* and *divan* are employed interchangeably to implicate a spatial and temporal presence of the spiritual authority manifested in Guru Granth Sahib, the assembly of devoted Sikhs and their acts of mediating *gurbani* – all of which represent agents by which individual Sikhs may quest for spiritual progress and the divine. In popular speech the idiom of court more specifically denotes the daily liturgical framework of worship acts that convey *gurbani* and are carried out in presence of Guru Granth Sahib by the attending congregation.

The morning and evening services in the public gurdwaras of Varanasi consist of a number of acts that are framed by the ritualized enthronement and restoration of Guru Granth Sahib (See Figure 9). Each morning begins with *Prakash* or “the light”, which is the installation and opening ceremony of Guru Granth Sahib on the royal throne, and every day is concluded at nightfall by *Sukhasan*, “the comfortable posture”,<sup>339</sup> when the Guru-scripture assumes a closed position and leaves the throne for rest in the bedroom. The daily enactment of these two ceremonies activates and passivates the Guru-scripture and creates the framework of courtly sessions and congregational worship in the gurdwara. After the scripture has been installed before sunrise the “court” starts operating and continues to do so until all the discrete parts of the morning liturgy – recitations, musical performances, prayer, offering and distribution of blessed food – have been completed and the court is accordingly “over” or “closed”. Normally the morning session will span over three and a half hours in total, whereas the evening service usually takes about two hours to complete. In the local setting the *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* are typical “liturgy-oriented” ceremonies,<sup>340</sup> in the sense that they consist of sequences of stipulated acts to be enacted with exactitude and which progress in a similar order. The performance of these acts follow a preordained pattern and display only minor variations depending upon individual ability and style of the officiating person, usually the *granthi*, who by years of practice learns how to refine the separate acts within a liturgical structure. To understand the ways by which the Sikhs establish an authoritative presence of Guru Granth Sahib and court sessions for the attending congregation it is to these stipulated acts we must turn our attention.

#### THE MORNING LITURGY

There is no fixed time prescribed for the *Prakash* ceremony, more than it should be accomplished before dawn and within the framework of *amritvela*, or the ambrosial hours, which span between 2 and 6 in the morning. In order to complete the full ceremony and the subsequent recitations prior to the rising of the sun, the scripture is usually inducted on its seat at 4.30 in the morning on ordinary days, and one hour earlier when morning-processions (*prabhatferis*) are going on before the festivals sol-

<sup>339</sup> In yoga traditions *sukhasan* refers to the comfortable body posture of sitting on the ground with the legs crossed.

<sup>340</sup> See Atkinson’s (1989) distinction between liturgy-oriented and performance-oriented rituals.

emnizing Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh's birthdays. The *granthis* quite often take a rather pragmatic attitude when elucidating this particular choice of time: "We do *Prakash* in the early morning because of the convenience to the devotees, so that people can come here and do readings. If someone is arriving early he should not have to wait," one of them said. As a general rule one scripture should always be placed on the central throne to be used for the daily services, whereas additional scriptures may be ceremonially seated on the side or on palanquins for recitations. For instance, in Nichibagh Gurdwara the *granthi* daily enthrones three scriptures, two of which are invested only for lay recitations and put to rest at four in the afternoon.

In a typical *Prakash* ceremony (exemplified in the prelude of this chapter) the *granthi* or any other attendant approaches the Guru Granth Sahib, resting under sheets in the bedroom, by uttering the *mulmantra*, the first verse of the scripture, and then the individually chosen greeting (*vandna*) that consists of a single stanza drawn from the scripture.<sup>341</sup> Immediately after, he lifts up the book and carries it on his head to the scriptural throne, while repeatedly chanting the name of God (*Satnam Vahiguru*). When Guru Granth Sahib is not used for readings it is tightly tied with an underclothing of white cotton and veiled in outer robes. Therefore, the first thing a *granthi* should do is to remove these cloths, in other words "undress" the scripture before he places it comfortably on its seat. This procedure requires a great deal of practice to get it right; while he is balancing the volume on his head with support of one hand, he arranges the cloths and cushions with the other. When this is set the scripture is seated and the *granthi* pays obeisance by touching the lower part of the book cover with his forehead. He then opens Guru Granth Sahib and for a moment covers it with robes, before he gracefully removes the cloth and starts reading the divine command. The daily ritual enactment of the *Prakash* ceremony opens up a means of access to the interior of scriptural body – the Guru – which is enclosed by clothes. Unwrapping the robes of the scripture brings the Guru into the world. In a literal sense the word *prakash* signifies light, enlightenment or spiritual awakening, and thus refers to the liberating way or teaching the Guru brings about. Guru Nanak brought this light to the dark and degenerated age (*kaliyug*) and the same glare and spirit inhabited the nine succeeding Gurus, and ultimately the scripture. After the spiritual authority was transferred to the the book, it is consequently the daily opening ceremony of the Guru-scripture that brings the spiritual glare out and makes it attainable in a temporal space.

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<sup>341</sup> As a local *granthi* told, it is *maryada* or stipulated practice according to the Sikh code of conduct to first utter the *mulmantra* and then greet Guru Granth Sahib before commencing the *Prakash* ceremony. The text chosen for the greeting should be a verse freely chosen from the scripture and will work an act of submitting oneself to the Guru. Sometimes the chosen verse and the speech act during which it is uttered is referred to as *dandaut* – a full prostration. The *granthi* I spoke with had chosen a hymn by Guru Arjan on page 256 in Guru Granth Sahib as his personal greeting: "I bow down [*dandaut*], and fall to the ground in humble adoration, countless times, to the All-powerful Lord, who possesses all powers."

## THE DIVINE COMMAND

On any occasion when the scripture has been ritually installed, the first thing the *granthi* will do is to open it at random and take out a *Hukam*, a hymn or unit of verses considered to be a divine “command” that will appeal to the whole community for a period of one day. The hymn that comes into view on top of the left page of the opened spread identifies the textual section that will constitute a divine command. The *granthi* goes back to the beginning of that hymn, even if it starts on the previous page, and continues to read it until the name of Nanak appears in the text. The signature of Nanak is a mark of closure for a unit of stanzas that constitute a hymn and likewise marks the end of a command.<sup>342</sup> The ceremony goes by different names that mirror the believed qualities of the hymn that will come out: people say they “take a divine order” (*hukam lena*), “take the liberated Word” (*mukhvak lena*), or “take the sound/voice” (*avaz lena*). Even though the *granthi* or some other attendant conducts the opening act, the *Hukam* is held to be a manifestation of a divine will, mediated through the written words in the Guru-scripture and orally communicated by the *granthi*. It is the randomness of the opening act of the scripture that determines and embodies the particular will of God, upon which people should respond and act in their worship and social life. The command taken daily in the gurdwara is considered to be a divine guidance for the whole congregation attached to the place at which the Guru-scripture is made present.<sup>343</sup> Consequently, there will be one daily *Hukam* for worshippers in Gurubagh Gurdwara, and another in Nichibagh Gurdwara. In addition, the act of taking of a divine command is integrated in almost every life-cycle ritual of the Sikhs. Individuals and families often go the gurdwara to let the *granthi* perform the Sikh supplication and take divine commands from Guru Granth Sahib in different life situations and for a variety of purposes. According to the underlying emic logic of these acts they serve to establish a dialogic communication with a divine power: by means of the supplication people present requests and queries to God and in return they receive a guiding and foretelling divine reply. “It is a royal decree (*pharman* [Persian]). We do not have to go around searching for answers, we just go to Guru Granth Sahib ji, take a *Hukam* and try to follow that”, one interlocutor stated. When individuals or the collective are to arrive at decisions in important matters they commonly take a *Hukam* that will provide directions and even determine the final result of their action. As I witnessed in Varanasi, lay Sikhs who do not have access to

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<sup>342</sup> All the Gurus, whose hymns are included in Guru Granth Sahib, used the signature “Nanak” as a mark of closure of a poetic unit. If the *Hukam* that comes is preceded by a *shalok*, a shorter unit of verses summarizing a hymn or ballad (*var*), the *granthi* should go back and read the full *shalok* and then continue through the following main hymn until the line containing the name of Guru Nanak appears.

<sup>343</sup> The *Hukam* taken at Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar is considered to count for a global Sikh community. Wherever Sikhs are living in the world they can receive the daily command by email directly from Amritsar through various web sites on the Internet (See e.g. [www.spgc.org](http://www.spgc.org), [www.sikhnet.org](http://www.sikhnet.org)).



scriptures at their houses may visit the gurdwara to take a personal *Hukam* or let the *granthi* take one for them. For whichever purpose the *Hukam* is taken the appearing *gurbani* hymn is often treated as a divination foretelling the destiny to come.<sup>344</sup> In the gurdwara the *granthi* and other specialists will assist laypersons to interpret the semantic content of a command and tell whether the divine reply was “good” or “hard”. If a *Hukam* does not come out well people may hesitate to embark on a journey or reconsider a plan, and several local anecdotes report on tragedies ensuing from neglect of these divinatory stanzas. Nevertheless, people believe that the destiny foretold by the command will occur at any event, since it is ultimately the revealed will of God.<sup>345</sup> In most cases the temporal jurisdiction of a *Hukam* depends upon the purpose and for whom the ritual act of taking a command is conducted: the one that



The *Hukam* written on a framed whiteboard outside the gurdwara

comes out in the daily liturgy of the gurdwara is a general and guiding decree applying to the whole congregation for one full day, whereas the validity of commands taken for specific reasons are particularized to persons and events that will be presented and specified in the preceding supplication.

In gurdwaras of Varanasi the congregational *Hukam* is orally rendered thrice a day: two times during the morning liturgy and once in the evening before closing the court. Each morning the *granthi* is therefore memorizing the hymn that makes the daily *Hukam* and the page number(s) on which it is included in Guru Granth Sahib, in order to open the scripture on the same page and repeat the hymn in the evening. On each of these occasions the *granthi* usually renders the *Hukam* in two specific speech styles to make the referential content clear and enhance the identity of the hymn as a divine command. Firstly, he presents the whole unit of a *shabad*, including its sub-heading, in a singing manner at a slow pace by using an ascending melody in minor mode with long intonations on the last rhyming word of each line. The dramaturgical elements of his rendering – high-pitched voice and melody – convey the impression of a royal proclamation. Owing to its formal features in performance the *Hukam* is very easy to recognize in a ritual setting. Rather than just reading the text, the *granthi* is melodiously crying or calling it out to

<sup>344</sup> The *granthi* referred to the *Hukam* for individual purposes as *bhag*, a noun with multifold meanings but which in this context signify one's fate that is predicted and shared through the hymn.

<sup>345</sup> For instance, one interlocutor told a story about a saintly person who performed the Sikh supplication and took *Hukam* before embarking on a journey. When the *Hukam* came out a little hard people advised the saint to cancel his plan. He refused any cancellation, stating that his journey had already been sanctioned by the Sikh supplication and whatever happened he would consider the will of God. Soon after the man met with an accident and died.

underscore its identity as a command. The final line of the *Hukam*, which includes the name of Nanak, is normally repeated twice with an extra long intonation on the last word. As a closure of the first rendering the *granthi* will utter the Khalsa ovation (*Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki Fateh*). Secondly, the *granthi* will repeat the entire *Hukam* or, if the command includes a summarizing refrain (*shalok*), read the *shalok* with a high-pitched voice and clear enunciation to bring out the locutionary meaning of the text. In the latter case, he will read until the word *rahau* or “pause” appears in the text which marks the end of *shalok*. Repeating the Khalsa ovation concludes the ceremony and the *granthi* covers the opened scripture with robes. For those who do not have any opportunity to receive the oral performance of a day’s command it will be communicated in writing on an in-glazed whiteboard outside the gurdwara entrance. When the morning ceremony is over the *granthi* will write down its first four lines, headed by information about the metrical form and author of the hymn, as well as on which page number it is to be found in Guru Granth Sahib. Throughout the day visitors will halt before the day’s command, view and read it, and in acts of reverence touch the lower part of board frame before they enter the gurdwara. Some will also look up the page number to read the day’s command directly from the scripture by themselves. For devotees the *Hukam* is regarded as an expression of a divine will communicated by the Guru who continues to act and interact with the Sikhs in the present.

After the first enunciation of the *Hukam*, the *granthi* will continue to recite the composition *Sukhmani Sahib* (See Chapter 3), which takes about one hour and ten minutes to complete. During this morning-hour visitors will start to drop in, one by one, for their daily worship and choose themselves how much time they will spend in the gurdwara. Each day of the year the discrete acts of the morning liturgy follow a similar pattern. The only exception occurs on *sangrand* – the first day of the solar month according to the Vikrami calendar. In the early morning of this day many local Sikh families will prepare the sweetened pudding and other types of food at their houses and then go to the gurdwara to present it to Guru Granth Sahib and hearken the recitation of *Barah Maha*, or “the twelve months” – a hymn of Guru Arjan that mentions the twelve Punjabi months in a calendar year. Within the sequence of a morning liturgy, the recitation of *Barah Maha* is usually inserted after the congregational reading of *Ardas* close to 6 am. The *granthi* will first enact all the twelve verses of *Barah Maha* once, and then repeat the particular stanza for the month that has just begun.<sup>346</sup> Meanwhile the worshippers will receive *karah prashad* as a beneficial return gift for the food they have surrendered in favor of the new month. Afterwards, during the subsequent session of devotional music (*kirtan*), the *ragi* performers may sup-

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<sup>346</sup> In domestic gurdwaras the *Barah Maha* is performed according to a similar pattern in the morning of *sangrand*, and some informants used to recite the verse for the current month everyday. The methods for sharing a reading of *Barah Maha* amongst family members differ. For example, one woman said she used to recite the month-specified verse, while her husband read the whole composition.

ply the audience with an expositive rendering of *Barah Maha* in modern Hindi and Punjabi. Like other worship-acts in the Sikh religious life, the oral performance of the composition is attributed various meanings. Some informants would allege that reciting *Barah Maha* in combination with the *Ardas* makes a monthly plea to God for protection and welfare, while others simply say it “brings luck” or they “feel lucky” to have listened to the verses for a new month. Irrespective of these individual meanings, the recitation of *Barah Maha* is carried out in a similar fashion and will mark the beginning of a new month in the Guru’s house.

#### THE EVENING LITURGY

The evening liturgy called *Sukhasan*, or “the comfortable posture”, is performed after sunset and consists of several constituent parts that build up the ceremony. Similar to the morning liturgy the congregation will read the Sikh prayer *Ardas* and listen to the *Hukam* that was taken before daybreak and has been valid for a whole day. The central feature of the evening liturgy, however, is the solemn closure of the Guru Granth Sahib. After a day installed on the royal throne the book cover is graciously folded up and enclosed in layers of tightly tied white robes. The wrapping ceremony signifies the instant when the text assumes a passive position and departs from the congregation for rest in the private bedroom. The scripture is always dressed in robes to the tune of the hymn *Kirtan Sohila* (GGS: 12 – 13), or “The Song of Praise”, chanted aloud or silently by the attendant in service. In different religious settings the recitation of *Kirtan Sohila* indicates a closure. Before going to sleep at night individual Sikhs will recite the composition as a stipulated bedtime prayer. At the popular level people will say the hymn provides the reader with peaceful sleep and protection from nightmares and evil forces during the dark hours. Instead of the customary rite of *Arti* – circulating a fire or lamp – outside the shop at night Sikh businessmen will recite *Kirtan Sohila* and present a small supplication in front of the barred doors, believing their business will be protected from nocturnal burglars. An elderly Sikh man in Varanasi said, “*Kirtan Sohila* is like a padlock that closes the day. After *Kirtan Sohila* we do not recite any other *bani*”. Since death, elimination of fear, and liberation are central themes of the composition, it also marks the closing stage of a human life. After the funeral pyre has been lit at the cremation ground the mourners or an attendant from the gurdwara will recite *Kirtan Sohila* as the very last prayer for the departing soul.<sup>347</sup> The recitation of this particular hymn thus seals each day in the human life and the court of the Guru as well as it marks the closing moment of life itself.

When the wrapping procedures are completed, the *granthi* will read a shorter version of the Sikh supplication and then in a small procession solemnly carry the scripture on his head to the bedroom for rest. Normally this occasion marks an impressive moment of the ceremony: all people assembled, young and old, are creating a pathway for the scripture by kneeling and touching the floor with their foreheads,

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<sup>347</sup> The Sikh scribe Bhai Gurdas explains that gurmukhs do not weep on the occasion of death, but recite *Sohila* in the company of holy persons (Jodh Singh 1998: 154).

while melodiously chanting “True Name, Oh Guru” (*Satnam Vahiguru*) in chorus. Occasionally the congregation will sing stanza 19 of the composition *Asa di var* or *Ashtapadi 4:8* of the beloved hymn *Sukhmani Sahib* during the ceremonial conveyance (See Chapter 3). Once the *granthi* has reached the bedroom and put the scripture to bed under blankets, he exhorts all participants to exclaim the Sikh *jaikara* (*Jo bole so nihāl*), whereupon all respond by shouting *Sat Sri Akal*. The salutation is a verbal marker that announces the end of the Guru’s court, and, if the gathering is not immediately dispersed, it generally entails a striking change in behavioral patterns of the worshippers. As long as the scripture is enthroned people will act in a discreet and graceful manner inside the gurdwara: they carry out *matha tekna* and calmly take seats without chitchat or magnified body gestures. With the closing signal the disciplinary behavior is immediately replaced by a jumble of people moving in different directions, some are rushing home, while others exchange greetings and engage in conversations. People maintain order of conduct as long as Guru Granth Sahib is present, and revert to behavioral patterns of the ordinary social life when the scripture is removed from the courtly room. This presence and discipline of conducts are only spatialized in the inner sanctum. Outside the gurdwara hall people may sit or hang about at some landing, socializing and chatting with friends or just observing people, while the children are playing cricket or some other game in the courtyard.

#### THE LOGIC OF MINISTRATION

The rule-governed acts in Sikh ceremonies definitely underscore the ethos that the Guru Granth Sahib should not be treated as just an ordinary book. As the previous section examined, many Sikhs believe the human Gurus of the past embodied the same “spirit” and agency of a personal Guru which the Guru Granth Sahib now inhabits and manifests. By tradition the Sikhs have come to attribute their scripture habits and needs that presumably were actualized in the domestic and courtly life of the human Gurus and selectively perpetuated into the future life of the Guru enshrined in a text. A consequence of having the Guru Granth Sahib conceived as a personal Guru in the social world is that the relationship between devotees and the scripture takes on the quality of a social relationship. For believing Sikhs the spiritualized text becomes a “social other” which/who is entitled to receive appropriate ministration that corresponds with devotional services that disciples rendered to the human Gurus in the past.

At the local level this ministration is contained in the emic notion of *gurseva*, or selfless service to the Guru. In concept and action *gurseva* encompasses a wide range of actions directed to the Guru Granth Sahib and the congregation of Sikhs. In fact, most activities which employees share with visiting devotees inside a gurdwara are talked of as *seva* and include all forms of ritualized acts in the daily liturgies to practical duties of keeping the Guru’s house tidy and clean. To dust and polish the scriptural throne at night, scrub the gurdwara floor, or offer new scriptural robes, are understood as *gurseva* in the guise of oblation to the Guru Granth Sahib. More organ-

ized undertakings, such as collective processions and transportations of the scripture, would fall into the same category of devotional services. *Seva*, however, is not just any type of action but voluntary deeds transformed to religious acts by means of the actor's subjective experience of devotion and surrender. The following chapter will analyze the inherent qualities of action regarded as selfless service and how acts charged with devotion becomes a paradigmatic means to purify the inner of humans, earn merits, and mould personalities as humble servants of the Guru. Cognizant of the fact the Guru Granth Sahib is not alive in any biological sense and the true Guru is ultimately the teaching dwelling within its pages, the daily ministration of the scripture is held to be the most pure and merit-bestowing forms of *seva* that articulate and invoke enduring relationships between Sikh disciples and the spiritual preceptor embodied in the text. The scripture should be venerated, not merely because the tradition prescribes so, but for the reason that the scripture continues to bestow transcendental knowledge and mediate links between humans and the divine, which is the ultimate object of worship. For believing Sikhs the all-encompassing notion of *gurseva* is not considered symbolic in the sense that the acts performed are representing something else, even if the design of action have been moulded after culture-specific symbolism to confer and confirm authority and regal splendor of the scripture. Instead, the logic of ministration to Guru Granth Sahib is that it signifies real services which permit actual physical interaction between the Guru and devotees.

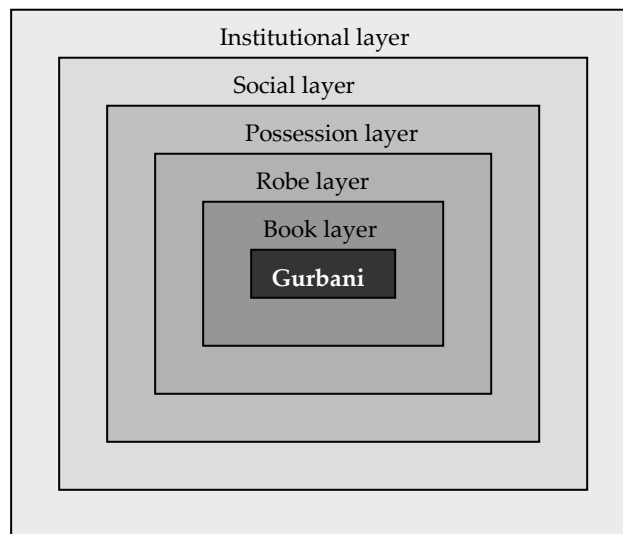


Figure 10.

The ministration of Guru Granth Sahib in a gurdwara may seem to be the type of action that responds best to the nature of the text, but the acts also invest the text with spiritual authority and social agency of a Guru acting in the world. By enmeshing the book in a structure of daily routines of the *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* ceremonies,

the book is set in a context of external relationships articulated in language and social practices of humans. Through these routine acts, enacted by devotees, the scripture manifests itself as a “social other” and becomes the target of real ministration within the framework of social relationships between the Guru and devotees. The ritual action does not merely reflect or represent existing relationships, but are external strategies to effectively create the presence and authority of a majestic Guru who continues to interact with disciples.<sup>348</sup> Simultaneously the scripture is presented in a setting that is aimed at the inner centre of the text, that is, *gurbani* or the words and teaching of Gurus which eventually is the true Guru. The arrangement of spaces and ritual acts in a gurdwara has “concentric” features to underscore that what should be the object of veneration is not only the scriptural corpus, but the interior of *gurbani*. The daily ceremonies of unwrapping and wrapping the clothes of Guru Granth Sahib have the function of revealing and concealing its internal form and thereby regulate the routes of entry and access to its interior. Considering spatial arrangement the book cover of Guru Granth Sahib constitutes the external vessel which enshrines and protects the locus of agency – the words dwelling within the pages of the text (See Figure 10). The scripture is further enveloped with layers of textiles: firstly white underwear in cotton and over that robes to suit the weather of the season. Whenever the scripture is inactive, not opened or read from, it is covered with these clothes. At the heart of the gurdwara the scripture is mounted on a royal throne in a higher position and fronted by flowers, weapons and other attributes in possession and service of the Guru. The royal seat is surrounded by the devotional assembly and the constant stream of individual devotees who seek *darshan* and present the Guru with offerings and prayers. By their bodily presences and acts of reverence devotees are virtually wrapping the scripture in a social layer. The outermost “wrapper” around the Guru is the gurdwara building, the entrance of which marks the transition to a pure and peaceful space permeated with the sound of *gurbani*. Outside the gurdwara hall, but still within the temple complex, are the social institutions of the communal kitchen, school, hospital, etc., which represents the Gurus’ teaching implemented in the world. Visitors who enter the gurdwara will move through these different layers in an opposite direction than described here, from the outer space of charity towards the physical centre of the scriptural throne, and eventually reach the inner – *gurbani* mediated in script or sound from the unfolded book. Whenever the scripture is opened and recited or sung from, all the layers will be penetrated by the sound of *gurbani*.

Although it only requires the presence of a printed copy of Guru Granth Sahib to create a gurdwara, this chapter has so far illustrated that local Sikhs put a great deal of effort into designing and enchanting this space to situate the scripture in an extraordinary surrounding. The most guarded areas are the scriptural throne and the

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<sup>348</sup> Gell 1998.

bedroom, between which the scripture is daily transported in processions. These two spaces are entrenched in colorful royal regalia to produce sensory experiences and a pleasurable atmosphere. During the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday in the autumn the adornment is even more exaggerated; the gurdwara building is virtually covered with neon lights, every year in new experimental designs, and the throne is shrouded in marigolds and draperies. In the morning the air around the seat will be scented with sweet perfume when the scripture is installed and at night showered with petals. In sharp contrast to the magnified embellishment, the Spartan decoration of the recitation room for unbroken readings of the whole scripture – *sachkhand* – intentionally aims to suppress sensory impressions of the outside world for the purpose of stimulating introspective reflection on the Guru's words transmitted in sound. The combination of these contrasting spaces within the gurdwara responds to the temporal and spiritual aspects embedded in the Sikh perception of Guru Granth Sahib: the scripture is a social other, even a "juristic person", which/who continues to act in the world, and simultaneously enshrines the spiritual guidance of *gurbani*, the words and teaching of the Gurus, which will lead people on the path towards liberation. Around the scriptural throne devotees will interact with a Guru-scripture dressed and seated like a royalty at court, while the recitation room allows for an inwardly mergence with the Guru by listening to its words. The room of *sachkhand* is marked out as a space for an intense manifestation of the complete interior of the Guru, and therefore located on the second floor, on a higher level than the temporal throne.

### 2.3. SERVANTS AT COURT

Sikh discourses promptly stress that Sikhism is fundamentally an egalitarian religion: the Gurus preached social equality between humans in the social world and liberation is not dependent upon variables such as caste, gender, or ethnic adherence but the inner spiritual quest of individuals and the divine grace. When Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa in 1699 he brought this teaching to fruition by forming a new homogenous community and identity of Sikhs. Quoting a *gurbani* hymn a middle-aged male informant in Varanasi said the new Khalsa community of the Sikhs had abandoned previous social belongings and subsumed the previous Hindu *varna* system – the four hierarchically organized caste groups (*Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisha* and *Shudra*) – to create one single *jati*, or "caste", as a new religious gender which embraced the collective group of Singhs and Kaurs. Any gathering around the Guru Granth Sahib in company with devotees is a sacred space which actualizes ideals prescribed by a higher system than the everyday social life. Even if individual Sikhs choose not to uphold stricter religious identities in their private lives, they will comply with the collective norms of the gurdwara and may experience a sense of belonging and sharing a common identity as subordinate disciples of the Guru. That all people who act and interact within this space should ideally perceive and treat each

other as equals find expression in language uses. A person conducting work for the scripture and the congregation will be termed *sevak*, literally “servant”, “attendant” or “follower”,<sup>349</sup> or “the servant of the Guru” (*Guru kal da sevak*), irrespective of his or her social status or belonging. The gurdwara creates what Victor Turner (1969) has termed “communitas”, that is, an alternative mode of relationship between humans, or an anti-structure to the ordinary social system in which social roles are based on rules of kinship relations, caste and clan hierarchies. Unlike ordinary rules and social stratification within the organization of a society, communitas creates new boundaries of communal space and defines a sociability which corresponds to the image of a society regarded as a homogenous totality.<sup>350</sup>

The ideal mode of relationships continually recreated within the spaces of gurdwaras and devotional gatherings serves to underscore the absolute authority of the Guru over the Sikhs, coupled with an absolute equality between the Sikhs as inferior servants to the Guru. To promote another value system in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, the social rules which normally would define borders of interaction and regulate cultural practices, such as consumption of food, are consciously transformed or neutralized within these spaces. Inside the gurdwara a middle class man of high status may serve food and polish the sandals of a poor low caste woman – his very opposite on all social divisions in ordinary life – to foster humbleness and produce good karma for the future, even if he would put his social reputation and status at a stake if he considered performing the same acts in his everyday life on the outside.

From a religious viewpoint the performance of humble services may be viewed as an implementation of the Guru’s teaching and generate intense religious experiences of the underlying divine ethos of equality and unity between all humans, in contrast to social differentiations on the outside. It is to make a divine plan present in the social world of humans, at least momentarily. Duplications of actions in the gurdwara give form to dominant values held by the group and create experiences that neutralize or reverse the ordinary social structure it runs parallel to. Within the spatial borders of the gurdwara individuals temporarily abandon their regular social selves to become a collective body of loyal servants. The Sikh communitas is yet based on the pre-existing social structure and functions as a conscious neutralization of the ordinary social rules. A wealthy man who participates in *seva* practices inside the gurdwara to pursue spiritual merits will certainly upgrade his status and gain social power and reputation in the outside society. People will talk of him as a kind and religious person because he performs acts of humility which otherwise would degrade his position in the everyday life. An act considered low grading, and even polluting, in an ordinary social situation transforms to a merit-bestowing service in the Guru’s house. The higher the contrast is between the expected behaviors of peo-

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<sup>349</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 132.

<sup>350</sup> Turner 1969.



ple in the ordinary social structure and the acts they perform inside the gurdwara, the more humble will the individual person be evaluated.

While acknowledging the shared subordination of all disciples dwelling in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh community is also lauding collective norms that generate new social differentiations within the community. Based on the principle of equality Sikhs will often state their religion is without priesthood, as compared with other traditions, and at the same time extol Khalsa norms that are stipulated in the Sikh code of conduct (*Sikh Rahit Maryada*) and acted by Sikhs who have undergone the *khande di pahul* ceremony and comply with a stricter religious discipline.

### BECOMING A “COMPLETE” SIKH

The adoption of a Khalsa identity should ideally eliminate previous social categories and ranks for a shared identity as loyal disciples to the Guru. In the Sikh community the Khalsa identity remains the normative ideal in relation to which other Sikh identities and different grades of religiosity are measured. The well-known emic categories of *Keshdhari* – those who keep unshorn hair (*kesh*) and observe some of the Khalsa rules but have not gone through the initiation – and *Sahajdhari* – literally “slow-adopters” or Sikhs who do not observe the code of conduct (*rahit*) but believe only in Guru Granth Sahib – are evaluated relative to the ideal of an *Amritdhari* identity.<sup>351</sup> In Sikh ceremonies the term *amrit* commonly designates sweetened water that has been consecrated by recitations of hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. More explicitly, it refers to the blessed nectar-water distributed in the Khalsa ceremony *Khande di pahul*, or “the initiation of the double-edged sword”, also called *Amrit sanskar*, or “the ceremony of [taking] nectar”. A person who has undergone this ceremony and partaken of the nectar (*amrit chhakna*) is consequently called *Amritdhari*, literally a “bearer” or “holder” of *amrit*.

Local Sikhs may ascribe several significations and meanings to the adoptions of *Amritdhari* identity and personal motives that have induced them to undergo the ceremony. Half of the thirty-five community members who participated in my semi-structured interviews stated that they had “taken *amrit*” and assumed an identity as

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<sup>351</sup> The category of *Sahajdhari* Sikhs has been interpreted by Sikh reformists as those who are not yet prepared for the *Khande di pahul* ceremony but are moving on the path to becoming *Amritdhari* Sikhs in the future (see Lal 1999). The present Sikh code of conduct (*Sikh Rahit Maryada*) issued by the SGPC in 1950 is a *Khalsa Rahit* binding *Amritdhari* Sikhs worldwide. The manual does not reduce the definition of a “Sikh” to merely adopters of an *Amritdhari* identity but defines a Sikh as the human being who faithfully believes in One God, the ten human Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib, the utterance and teaching of the Gurus (*gurbani*), and the initiation ceremony promulgated by Guru Gobind Singh. The definition may include all the emic categories of a Sikh since one only needs to have faith in the *Khande di pahul* ceremony even if one does not undergo it.

*Amritdhari* Sikhs.<sup>352</sup> The major part of the respondents had gone through the ceremony in the local gurdwaras of Varanasi where the initiation had been arranged as a special program in connection with the festival *Vaisakhi* and the anniversary celebrating the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh. Only four interlocutors alleged they had traveled to other places, such as Patna Sahib or Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar, to go through the ceremony. As suggested by the data provided in the interviews, the Khalsa ceremony was organized sporadically in Varanasi during the 1970s and 1980s to become annual events during the 1990s.<sup>353</sup> On all of these occasions the ceremony was administered by saintly persons invited from Delhi, Punjab or the nearby Patna Sahib.<sup>354</sup> Two *Amritdhari* Sikhs who were interviewed had undergone the ceremony more than thirty years back, while the majority took initiation during the 1990s and had followed the normative code of conduct all between three to eight years. The data suggests an accelerating trend of adopting an *Amritdhari* identity, which may be a result of propaganda campaigns carried out in Varanasi districts and elsewhere at peaceful times subsequent to the political conflicts in the 1980s.

Looking at the ways in which local Sikhs are reasoning about past or future adoptions of an *Amritdhari* identity, the decision to undergo the baptism seems to be exclusively motivated by strong religious convictions. Many said they were inspired by the devotion expressed in acts and speeches of significant people – a pious cousin or friend, a saintly elder, or a group of pious Sikhs at a gurdwara. After witnessing the commitment of others they strongly felt an inner desire to go on the religious path. The Khalsa ceremony and ideals evoked various meanings depending upon their social backgrounds and the ways in which they chose to underline and interpret the norm. In general terms, the *Khande di pahul* did not imply a change of religious identity for individuals born into Sikh families – they were regarded as Sikhs both prior and subsequent to the initiation. For these people taking *amrit* was more about complying with the Guru's order and to refine an already existing religious identity to be internally oriented towards the Guru and God. For low caste Hindus converting to the Sikh religion, on the other hand, the Khalsa ceremony was seen as an opportunity to elevate their social status and signified a formal change of religious and social identity, even if they maintained customs of origin beside the new Khalsa life.

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<sup>352</sup> The statistic seems to display a rather high percentage of *Amritdhari* Sikhs and does not represent the Sikh community in Varanasi at large. The investigation was limited to a small group of community members, judged as active in gurdwara activities and selected for interviews.

<sup>353</sup> According to the interviews, the *Khande di pahul* ceremony was arranged on at least two occasions in the 1970s (Nichibagh Gurdwara in 1971 and Gurubagh Gurdwara in 1975). One interlocutor said the initiation was performed in Varanasi in 1989. During the 1990s there was at least four occasions on which local Sikhs took *amrit* (1992, 1994, 1997 and 1998).

<sup>354</sup> Whether the organizer of the *Khande di pahul* ceremony is a musician (*ragi*) or reciter (*granthi*) by profession he will in this context go by the honorific term "sant" to indicate his spiritual progression.

To illustrate the significances which local Sikhs may attach to the Khalsa ceremony and identity, I will here quote six responses of interlocutors relating their personal interpretations:

1. *A young woman*

If you don't take *amrit* you are not a complete Sikh of the Guru. You have to take *amrit* to become a complete Sikh.

2. *A young man*

Taking *amrit* is like adopting a discipline. If you are eating meat and drinking alcohol, you make a plan to quit these things. After taking *amrit* you totally stop. Taking *amrit* is not a miracle, it takes time to get used to the discipline, after one or two years you start to see the effect of it.

3. *A middle-aged woman*

It is important to be a Sikh of the Guru. Being *Amritdhari* you have to follow the daily discipline (*nitnem*), get up early in the morning and do recitations of five hymns (*panj banian ka path*) and in the evening recite *Rahiras Sahib* and *Kirtan Sohila*. Every *Amritdhari* has to do this. If you can not read then you should at least listen to it. We have to wear dagger (*kirpan*), bracelet (*kara*), shorts (*kacchera*), comb (*kanga*) and uncut hair (*kesh*). We have to always cover the hair, not keep it open. We cannot take food that has been tasted by other people, only food prepared by other *Amritdharis*. I can eat only with those who have taken *amrit*, not with others. In my family all has taken *amrit*.

4. *A middle-aged man*

This is a gift of the Guru. Every Sikh has to take *amrit* and follow the Guru's order. They will become complete (*pakka*) Sikhs. Others who do not follow the Gurus' order, they will go according to their own will and be incomplete (*adhura*).

5. *An elderly man*

If you don't take *amrit* you cannot be a perfect Sikh. After taking *amrit* you become a Sikh of Guru Gobind Singh ji who will be your father from that day. Mata ji, his wife, will be the mother of all Sikhs who have taken *amrit*. A Sikh who has taken *amrit* has to do recitations of five hymns [*panj banian ka path*] every day and that will bring about a change in him. He will get up before four in the morning to recite the name of God, *Vahiguru, Vahiguru, Vahiguru...*

6. *An elderly woman*

You see the dogs running in the streets. But some dogs have chains around their necks. You can see them travelling in cars. It is similar to that. Humans are always running here and there. But if I belong to the Guru, I can reach him. I will become a child of the Guru and he will take care of us. The Guru is not in any temple or mosque, the Guru is within your heart and soul. Those who take *amrit* become children of the Guru. Those who don't are not children of him. Whoever takes *amrit* is freed from 84 *laks* [8.4 million] births. When she will die, lord Yama will not come near her. She will be liberated. You have to adopt and follow the Gurus' words.

According to an almost unanimous opinion among the respondents, the individual who does not conform to the Khalsa norms should not be regarded as a "complete" or a "perfect" Sikh (See e.g. answer 1, 4, 6). Instead the uninitiated are considered as "imperfect" (*adhura*) and "unprincipled" disciples without a Guru (*nigura*), that is, drifters who may call themselves Sikhs but lack the presence of and the relationship to a Guru.<sup>355</sup> The evaluating distinction made between *Amritdharis* and other Sikhs should not be seen as expressions of orthodox Khalsa positions among community members at Varanasi, but is more related to how people look upon the ritual elements of the baptism and the regular engagement in *gurbani* which the personal discipline of *Amritdhari* Sikhs entails. The nectar which is distributed during the *Khande di pahul* ceremony is considered to be imbued with five *gurbani* verses which the persons representing the *panj pyare*, or the "five beloved", are reciting over sweetened water in a cauldron while stirring with the double-edged sword. These two components – recited *gurbani* and the sword – are believed to empower and transform the water into a nectar substance that has the capacity to completely purify and distil the inner and outer composition of aspirants when they ingest and are sprinkled with it. After the core act of receiving or "taking" nectar, the initiates will listen to the discipline of the Khalsa order, including a declarative statement that renounces previous social identities of the initiates and confirms their new spiritual rebirth and a com-

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<sup>355</sup> This interpretation of a non-*Amritdhari* Sikh may not be unique for contemporary Sikhs in Varanasi but find references in history. As Mann (1999) purports, unlike the existing distinction that is made between Sikhs and *Khalsa* Sikhs the historical sources of the early eighteenth century suggest that both Sikhs and Singhs were considered as being part of the early *Khalsa* community, the latter of which were those who had undergone the *Khande di pahul* ceremony. In the eighteenth century *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, the author made a hierarchal distinction between *Sahajdharis* and Singhs who wear unshorn hair and weapons, although the categories were not regarded as two separate identities but two ends of the spectrum representing the *Khalsa* ideal. In *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* *Sahajdharis* are called *Kache pile Sikh*, or "half-baked" or "not yet ripe" Sikhs who have to develop into Singhs.

mon identity in the egalitarian community of Khalsa Sikhs.<sup>356</sup> Given this verbal declaration local Sikhs frequently explain the *Khande di pahul* ceremony in terms of a solemn “initiation” (*diksha* [Sanskrit]), sometimes compared to rites of passage in other religions, such as the Muslim circumcision or the Christian baptism, that aim to establish and confirm human divine relationships. As one female respondent (answer 6) expressed in strong relational terms, to undergo the Khalsa ceremony is “to become a child of the Guru”, that is, initiate or deepen an affectionate relationship with the Guru to become a perfected Sikh or pupil (*Guru ka Sikh*). From this viewpoint, the Khalsa ceremony can be seen as a type of ritualized agreement between disciple and Guru, in which the disciple formally accepts the true Guru of *gurbani* and promises to strictly adhere to the Khalsa order and instructions in the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>357</sup> In academic and educational literature treating the Khalsa rite and *Amritdhari* Sikhs the focus is often restricted to the external symbols, the five K’s or *kakkar* (unshorn hair (*kesh*), dagger (*kirpan*), drawers (*kachhaira*), comb (*kanga*), and steel bracelet (*kara*)), which initiated Sikhs are obligated to wear and never remove from their body. In the local context Sikhs give the five K’s great importance and regard the symbols as the “uniform” of a Khalsa identity that was ordered by Guru Gobind Singh. Particularly the steel bracelet and the comb are integrated in Sikh life-cycle rites and ritually donated to infants as symbols considered instrumental for shaping their identity and character in a positive manner.<sup>358</sup> What studies do not always bring up for analysis is the commitment to keep a daily discipline of reciting a set of hymns and regularly engaging in *gurbani* through other readings from the Guru Granth Sahib. The *Amritdhari* Sikh is one who formally establishes a close relationship to the Guru, that is, the words enshrined in the Sikh scripture and other text sanctioned as *gurbani*. As one interlocutor pointed out, the ritual initiation into the discipline of Khalsa is not regarded as a miraculous event (answer 2), but an occasion which accomplishes an inner purification of the individual and initiates him or her into a long-term relationship with the true *Shabad* Guru.<sup>359</sup> By regular engagement in *gurbani* and a loving

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<sup>356</sup> The declaration states that Guru Gobind Singh is the spiritual father and Mata Sahib Kaur is the spiritual mother of the initiate, who should now consider Keshgarh Sahib at Anandpur Sahib as his or her native place.

<sup>357</sup> Many interlocutors would say the creation of the *Khande di pahul* ceremony by Guru Gobind Singh was itself the precious gift of a command which aimed to remove social inequalities and bring individuals to a higher realm of moral standards and spiritual awareness.

<sup>358</sup> Particularly the bracelet is used by all Sikhs as a powerful object believed to provide protection from misfortune and evil forces.

<sup>359</sup> On a symbolic level the ritual elements of the *Khalsa* ceremony resemble the events that took place during Guru Nanak’s travel to a divine abode. The tenth chapter (*Bein Praves*) of *Puratan Janam-sakhi* narrates how Guru Nanak was given a cup filled with nectar of the divine name from God. Only after the Guru Nanak accepted to drink from the cup, and thereby imbued his body with the nectar, did God choose him to be the Guru of the world. The narrative portrays the divine act of giving nectar and the Guru’s act of ingesting it as a ritual contract that established a close relationship between the Guru and God. Guru Nanak does not merely listen to the

devotion to God, humans will gradually transform their interior, develop moral qualities and achieve a state of purity, which is Khalsa or the state of a “complete” Sikh. The *Khande di pahul* ceremony initiates this process of change which will result in good merits for the future (See answer 6). Expressions such as “Guru ji said that *Amritdharis* will be on my list” or “*Amrit* is like a passport to salvation”, mirror a common belief that the adoption of an *Amritdhari* identity implies beliefs in divine protection in this life and spiritual gains, even liberation, hereafter.

To achieve the new state of purity which the *Khande di pahul* ceremony instigates, a disciplinary life-style which controls social life and the human body is considered necessary. When clarifying interpretations of an *Amritdhari* identity my respondents frequently recurred to the importance of complying with the rules given at the time of initiation. In addition to the four taboos (*char kurahit*) of dishonouring the hair, eating *halal* meat slaughtered in the Muslim way,<sup>360</sup> cohabiting with a person other than one's spouse, and using tobacco or other intoxicants, *Amritdharis* should particularly control the consumptions of edible and drinkable things and be careful with activities that involve contact with the bodily fluids of others. As a general rule, they should not eat food that has been “tasted” (*jutha*) or prepared in a kitchen of people other than *Amritdhari* Sikhs. In everyday life this does not pose any major problem since a couple or a family usually undergo the *Khande di pahul* ceremony together and observe the same rules of conduct. If a single family member chooses to adopt an *Amritdhari* identity alone he or she is likely to set up a separate kitchen within the household. It is expected from both husband and wife to be initiated since the conjugal and sexual life is considered to affect the state of purity of one and another. A young *Amritdhari* man in Varanasi told me that his *amrit* was “broken” after he married an *Amritdhari* girl because she had plucked her eyebrows before the wedding ceremony and thereby violated the rule of keeping the hair unshorn. Her “sin” of dishonoring hair was transferred to him when they exchanged fluids in the sexual act, and consequently both of them decided to take the compulsory punishment of transgression (*tankhah*) for apostates or the “fallen” (*patit*) in order to be re-initiated.<sup>361</sup> The assumption underlying this decision presumes that the *amrit* distributed in the Khalsa rite purifies and transforms the bio-moral composition of individuals which is to be guarded by protecting the body from edibles and bodily fluids that transmit pollution or vices.

Far from all Sikhs, however, are *Amritdharis* or hold the Khalsa norm desirable. In the structured interviews, eight men and women clearly stated that they had no interest in taking *amrit*, while seven respondents could be termed *Sahajdhari* Sikhs at

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divine name but embodies the name as a substance within his own body by drinking the nectar (see Bhai Vir Singh 1999 (1926): 39 – 43).

<sup>360</sup> This taboo is generally interpreted as vegetarianism.

<sup>361</sup> The punishment is aimed to create humility and submission in the apostate and may be of different types depending upon the act of violation. Normally the transgressor will be required to perform social service (*sewa*) for a selected period time and give monetary donations to a gurdwara or poor people.

the time of our conversations and conveyed plans to undergo the ceremony in the future. Three persons in the former category were Punjabi Sikhs who said they could not keep unshorn hair due to medical reasons. One interlocutor explained he was in touch with Muslims in his daily work and therefore unable to follow food restrictions of the Sikh code of conduct. Another took up a rather critical position, saying an *Amritdhari* identity was not a guarantee for pursuing merits in this or the life after: "I believe in all religions and if you perform bad actions not even the *amrit* will save you". In the same category of respondents, two persons of Sindhi families did not see the Khalsa norm as critical to their own religious identity or spiritual progress, even though one of them had assumed all the five symbols as a Khalsa Sikh prior to the riots in the 1980s. Even if individuals found it too demanding to obey the Khalsa norm, the majority did pay the greatest respect to the rules constitutive of it. Over again my interlocutors accentuated the importance of scrupulously observing the Khalsa rules of conducts after initiation. Three interlocutors admitted they had been *Amritdhari* Sikhs in the past, but "broke the *amrit*" when they drank wine, chewed tobacco (*pan*) and omitted daily recitations. The man who tasted tobacco decided to be re-initiated, while the two others expressed no interest in taking up the disciplinary lifestyle again. Contentions for not adopting an *Amritdhari* identity are supported by sound knowledge of the Sikh code of conduct and awareness of one's own incapability or disinterest in conforming to the norm.

To summarize it should be observed that for all Sikhs the adoption of an *Amritdhari* identity does not imply a formal change of religious or social identity, even if this will be the case for Hindu converts. To become a "bearer of *amrit*" through the *Khande di pahul* ceremony is seen primarily as a purifying rite to instigate a close relationship to God, which together with a disciplinary way of living and regular engagement in *gurbani* has capacity to refine an already existing Sikh identity to a "complete" disciple of the Guru. Loyalty to the Khalsa norm, however, has undoubtedly a strong impact on the social status of individuals within the community of Sikhs and the broader society. By portraying themselves as spiritually, morally and bodily purified *Amritdharis* represent ideal members of the community who stand above other Sikhs. Although there should ideally be no distinction in terms of social status between devotees, the organization of spaces and acts within the gurdwaras extol collective norms that distinguish *Amritdhari* Sikhs from other Sikhs and non-Sikhs. Only *Amritdhari* Sikhs are entitled access to all hallowed enclosures in the gurdwara and worship acts performed in the closest proximity to the Guru Granth Sahib. Many of the community members I interviewed were of the opinion that only *Amritdhari* Sikhs may be seated on the scriptural throne in the gurdwara to conduct the daily recitations and offerings to Guru Granth Sahib. "In the place of Guru Maharaj ji, only *Amritdhari* should do offerings (*bhog*) and serve offerings to people. Non-*Amritdharis* are also doing that. It should not be like that," one female interlocutor said. The collective norms in the gurdwara accomplish diverse effects simultaneously by forging a common identity of disciples of the Guru and reinforcing a particular relationship between *Amritdhari* Sikhs and other worshippers. The Sikh congregation

creates a sense of *communitas* and a shared identity within the group, at the same time as the Khalsa ideal marks out the borders of disciples given prior status.

### CATEGORIZING SPECIALISTS

Maybe the strong emphasis on egalitarianism and equality among the Sikhs themselves is a contributory cause as to why so little research has been conducted on the different types of Sikh performers who comply with the Khalsa norm and operate as religious “specialists” within the gurdwaras. Sikh apologetics often underline that the Sikh community, unlike other religious traditions, does not have any hierarchical body of ritually ordained clergymen or hereditary class of ritual specialists with unique religious ranks that clearly separates the group of “priests” from “the laity”.<sup>362</sup> All people dwelling within the house of the Guru should ideally be treated as equal disciples who share responsibilities. But there are professional categories of Sikh specialists or performers who by years of studies and training have pursued particular skill and competence in the various Sikh performing arts – music, recitation, exposition – and function as intermediaries to transmit and clarify the Gurus’ utterances and teaching to ordinary people. In evaluations by the Sikhs themselves these performers are often regarded as “knowledgeable” (*viddvan*) devotees, and some will be reckoned to have been graced with extraordinary spiritual knowledge. Without any pretension to exhaustively examine a subject that requires more field research, the following section will exemplify how local Sikh performers can be motivated to pursue careers in religious vocations and the duties and qualifications which community members consider crucial for performers who act as mediators of sacred words. According to Bauman’s (1977), the formal criterion for identifying “performance” as a distinctive communicative frame “consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for display of communicative competence.”<sup>363</sup> The performer’s competence to act and speak in socially appropriate ways will be subject to evaluation by the audience. It is when the given standards of competence are fully recognized and accomplished by the performers that their renditions of the Gurus’ teaching will be appreciated and regarded authentic by the Sikh congregation.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Leadership, however, does exist in the institution of *jatedhar* at the five Sikh “thrones” (*takhts*) at Amritsar, Anandpur, Damdama, Hazoor, and Patna, as well as the “The Society of Saintly People” (*Sant Samaj*), which is consulted in religious matters.

<sup>363</sup> Bauman 1977: 11.

<sup>364</sup> As Hymes writes, a “true performance”, i.e., a performance regarded authentic and authoritative in view of the audience, is “when standards intrinsic to the tradition are accepted and realized” (Hymes 1986: 18).



#### MEDIATORS OF GURBANI

In Varanasi the local gurdwara committee (VGPC) functions as the representative body of the Sikh congregation with authority to employ different types of performers for posts and assignments. In addition to the staff working at the hospital and the two schools run by the community, the committee is mainly responsible for three categories of appointments: firstly, there are employees who live and work in the gurdwaras, often with their families, in exchange for regular salaries. In this category are the *granthi*s with main responsibility for the daily ceremonies, the *ragi jatha* or group of Sikh musicians and *sevadars* who take care of practical duties. Secondly, there are performers who work on performance-based assignments inside the gurdwaras or at private houses, as in the case of *pathi*, or professional reciters who are engaged only for ceremonial recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib. The third category of specialists would include a range of performers who are more or less self-employed and invited by Sikh congregations on special occasions, like touring *kathakar*, or exegetes, and *pracharak*, or propagandists of the Sikh religion. The different categories of performers are relevant to the present study and are briefly discussed below, with particular focus on the *granthi*.

The term *granthi*, derived from the Sanskrit word *granthika*, signifies a narrator who reads the “book” (*grantha* [Sanskrit]) or a “book-specialist”, in this case of the Guru Granth Sahib. In colloquial speech the *granthi* is often addressed as Bhai Sahib or “respected brother” by other community members. Traditional accounts purport that the first *granthi* in Sikh tradition was the venerable Baba Buddha who was designated by Guru Arjan to attend the Sikh scripture when it was installed in Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar in 1604. Presumably the service of the *granthi* grew into importance after the Sikh scripture ascended to the office of the Guru and recitation, singing and expositions of the Guru’s teaching were completely incumbent on Sikh disciples in absence of a human preceptor. As manuscripts of the Sikh scripture were not broken into separate words (*padchhed*) until printed versions in the twentieth century, the *granthi* was the specialist with the skill to divide the lines of words and artfully recite, sing, and bring out meanings. The Sikh reform movements in the beginning of the twentieth century entailed more responsibilities and status of the *granthi* post when the Sikhs took charge of the administration of gurdwaras that had previously been in control of Hindu priests. Ritual duties managed by Brahmins – such as marriage and death ceremonies – were transferred to the domain of Sikh performers. The word *granthi* is frequently translated to mean the “custodian” of Guru Granth Sahib as his main duty is to conduct the daily liturgies and ministration to the Sikh scripture. This category of performers should be distinguished from *pathi*, or “reciter” (the one who does *path*), who similar to the *granthi* is trained in reading the Gurmukhi script and enunciating the words of Guru Granth Sahib without errors or interruptions. Unlike the *granthi*, a *pathi* is only employed for special recitations of the Sikh scripture (such as *Akhand path*) and does not need any formal education. The *pathi* will make no additional commentaries or interpretations of the recited texts.

In practice the local *granthi* often assumes full responsibility for all religious activities in the gurdwara. He remains the key actor in Sikh rites of passage and is regularly invited to private houses to conduct prayers, carry out recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib, and distribute water-nectar (*amrit*) to family members. The *granthis* in Varanasi called themselves “all-rounders” on duty twenty-four hours and emphasized they had to master all the Sikh worship forms, even the performance of devotional music (*kirtan*), in case there was no one else to lead the congregation. At the time of my field work each of the two urban gurdwaras had in duty one “assistant *granthi*” who was a junior trainee in charge of some sections of the daily liturgies under supervision of the senior “head *granthi*” with final responsibility to ensure all ceremonies.

The gurdwara has its busy and quiet times as reflected in the working schedule of *granthis*. The most hectic hours of the day are the mornings and evenings. On an ordinary day the *granthis* in Varanasi usually woke up between 3 am and 4 am to take a bath and commence the morning liturgy stretched over four hours. In the day-time they were frequently booked for home visits, discussions with employees and community members, or other events, while they occasionally reserved time for a nap in the hotter and drowsier afternoons when visits of devotees temporarily came to a halt. From 5 to 6 pm the *granthis* were occupied with the evening liturgy until they went to bed at about 10 at night. Then the gates to the gurdwara were closed, unless pilgrims arrived to seek shelter in the Guru’s house.

The title *ragi* is widely used for those who sing the Gurus’ hymns to music and elaborate the spiritual meanings of *gurbani*. Sikh musicians contracted for posts in the gurdwara usually appear in *ragi jatha*, or an ensemble of three male musicians. They will sing *gurbani* hymns accompanied to music in the daily morning and evening services and during festivals (See Chapter 3). Apart from the aesthetic rendition of *gurbani*, the *ragis* provide expositions of the Sikh teaching. As the musicians themselves assert, devotional Sikh music or *kirtan* was already established by Guru Nanak, whose utterances of divine messages were revealed to celestial tunes of Mardana’s rebeck (*Rabab*). Professional musicians in the tradition of Mardana, called *Rababis* (rebeck-players), were employed in the Sikh court to perform the Gurus’ hymns. The fifth Guru Arjan, however, came to encourage ordinary people to be independent of professional musicians and perform *kirtan* by themselves. One popular story tells that *Rababis* became covetous and refused to perform music unless they would receive a required monetary fee. In consequence Guru Arjan began to train *ragis*, or Sikh musicians to sing scriptural hymns with accompaniment of instruments.<sup>365</sup>

The gurdwaras at Varanasi retained one *ragi jatha* each for conducting the daily services. All the musicians I met were of different ages, the youngest only sixteen years old, and originated from different parts of Northern India, such as Punjab, Haryana, and Assam. They resided in the gurdwara with their wives and children. Since the musicians normally were free in the day-time they would accept invitations

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<sup>365</sup> Mansukhani 1982: 60 – 61.

to neighboring congregations. The *ragi* ensembles were more frequently changing in the gurdwaras. Usually a group would stay a year or two at one location to gain practical training and new experiences and then continue to more prestigious Sikh centers or gurdwaras closer to the home districts. A young *ragi jatha* with ambitions to move up the career ladder told me that the ultimate goal for Sikh musicians is to perform *kirtan* inside Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar. Elderly performers, in contrast, seemed to be more content to mediate *gurbani* wherever the Gurdwara committees would bring them.

Another emic category of Sikh performers is *kathakar*. The noun *katha* (Sanskrit) stands for exposition, narration, and oral discussion of sacred text. In the early Indian history the term *kathakar* or “story-teller” was apparently synonymous with the term for a “book-specialist” (*granthika*), but by the eighteenth century signified a specific type of performer in the Vaishnava devotional tradition who told stories accompanied with dance and gestures in temples and later on in royal courts.<sup>366</sup> In Sikhism the term *kathakar* came to denote a performer who delivers religious discourses on the Gurus’ compositions and thus the meaning of the word is intimately associated with special knowledge in religious texts. According to the tradition, the formal beginning of *katha* performances occurred with the compilation of the Sikh scripture in the early seventeenth century when scribes, deputies, and other Sikh leaders appointed by the Gurus begun to interpret and orally expound on scriptural hymns at devotional gatherings. A legend tells that Guru Tegh Bahadur predicted in the seventeenth century that Talvandi Sabo in the Punjab would become a center for Sikh students, scribes, and exegetes, saying the town would be the Guru’s Kashi or city of learning. In the early eighteenth century the Sikh scribe Bhai Mani Singh, who prepared a copy of the Sikh scripture (Damdama version), was instructed by Guru Gobind Singh to explicate the scripture and start a school of knowledgeable scholars (*giani*) at Talvandi Sabo. Modern Sikh *kathakars* often claim to be “exegetes” or “expounders” belonging to this tradition.

The *kathakar* is responsible for a creative oral retelling and expounding on the spiritual meanings (See Chapter 3) of the Guru Granth Sahib, which requires sound knowledge in *gurbani*, Sikh literature and history, Punjabi stories, proverbs, and sometimes sacred scriptures of other religions. Unlike larger Sikh shrines the gurdwaras at Varanasi did not have a *kathakar* permanently employed. Most of the *kathakars* I met were self-employed local performers, constantly on tour within geographical circumferences of different sizes, either alone or with a friend or the family. On special occasions they were invited to Varanasi or just passed by on their way to some other location in Northern India. They would reside in the gurdwara for a couple of days and deliver religious discourses in exchange of monetary donations or fixed fees. Being a traveling *kathakar* was for most a full-time job from which they earned their livelihood.

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<sup>366</sup> Hein 1972.

Some of the local *kathakars* may claim to be *pracharak*, or “propagandist” or “promoters” of the Sikh religion. Their work is aimed at religious edification within the Sikh community but also to attract people of other faiths to the Gurus’ teaching and practices. A senior *kathakar* traveling in the district of Varanasi, for instance, said he had earlier worked as a *pracharak* for the *Shahid Sikh Missionary College* at Amritsar but in the autumn of his life decided to obey Guru Nanak’s teaching and take up agriculture. Regularly he was invited to Varanasi to give *katha* on the Sikh teaching and history, especially on festival days commemorating the Gurus. When distinguishing between the two services he said that the *kathakar* needs to be modest and humble in performance and should provide keys to open up new understandings of *gurbani*, while the *pracharak* should be more dramatic in his speeches and acts in order to campaign for the Sikh religion.

The last category of employees in the gurdwara to be mentioned is not performers who have pursued competence in recital, music, or oratory, but those who work as unskilled labour. Like other devotees engaged in services in the gurdwara they will go by the name *sevadars*, or “servants” to the Guru and the Guru’s house, only with the difference that they are paid a smaller salary for their work. Most *sevadars* in Varanasi were low caste Hindus of rural background and lived either alone or with their families in the gurdwara. Their duties, which they perceived to be selfless service (*seva*), involved all practicalities – to clean the floors, prepare food, accommodate pilgrims, repair machines, watch and close the gates, go on errands for the gurdwara, and so on. Some would gain proficiency in reading *gurbani* and eventually advance to the post of a reciter or assistant *granthi*.

As a general rule all people working in the gurdwaras receive a monthly salary and are provided with free meals in the communal kitchen, hospital care at *Guru Nanak Hospital*, and elementary education for their children at *Guru Nanak Khalsa School*. Between the years 1999 and 2001 a *granthi* would receive a monthly payment of 2500 rupees for himself and his family. The salary level of *ragis* varied between 8000 and 10000 rupees depending on the skill and repute of the group. This amount was to be shared between three people and their respective families.<sup>367</sup> Since *sevadars* are seen as “unskilled” labor, in the sense that no training or education is required, they receive the lowest payment, between 600 to 1500 rupees a month depending on the extent of their duties. In addition, the committee distributed pay envelopes to *granthis*, *kathakar* and different *sevadars* working outside the two main gurdwaras for the purpose of promoting Sikhism in the rural district surrounding Varanasi. From these brief examples it is evident that the fixed payments given to people working in the gurdwaras are means of subsistence even if their income may be supplemented by monetary donations. Professions in a gurdwara should be selfless service to the Guru and the community, and not occupations for making a profit.

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<sup>367</sup> Paid out of town musicians of regional or even national repute will have fixed prices for performances at a much higher rate. *Ragi* ensembles from the Punjab may require 15000 rupees or considerably more for a single performance.

#### GRACED GUIDES

Whereas the above-mentioned categories of performers imply occupational posts, *giani* is an honorary title conferred to a person who has pursued and possesses knowledge (*gian*) of Guru Granth Sahib, usually a religious scholar or learned exegete who may work as a teacher for others. A *granthi* may be titled knowledgeable (*giani*) by community members, but far from all considered *giani* will go into the vocational field. The knowledge signified in this context does not merely involve intellectual understanding pursued through studies or training, but spiritual insights that have evolved from intense religious practices. When local people attempt to verify the *giani* status of a particular person they often refer to his or her proven dedication to Guru Granth Sahib which grants powers to provide other people religious guidance. A middle-aged Sikh man, for instance, authenticated the *giani* status of his late father by relating how he was immersed in recitation and contemplation on *gurbani* for sixteen hours a day, in other words, all waking hours in a day. By internalizing the words of the Sikh scripture his father was graced with power to guide others and even foresaw his own death.

Another epithet used for a pious and deeply religious man is the term *sant*, which etymologically is derived from the Sanskrit word for “truth” (*sat*) and signifies a person who has achieved knowledge and a state of spiritual advancement. Historically the word *sant* designated enlightened poet-saints in different bhakti groups of India who attracted believers with various degrees of formal organization. Within the Sikh tradition the word came to assume wider connotations in the twentieth century, referring to men who have gained reputation for their piety and religious preaching as well as preservers of Punjabi heroic traditions and political leaders.<sup>368</sup> In local usage the term *sant* however seems to be more restricted to men or a collective group of people (*sant log*) who are reputed for their extraordinary spiritual knowledge and live as moral exemplars for others. By devotion and spiritual pursuits people believe they obtain spiritual powers (*siddh*) which can be used to benefit others. Several of my interlocutors in Varanasi characterized *sants* as humble and simple living individuals who had developed a close relationship with God and therefore possessed powers to mediate and draw other devotees closer to the teaching of the Sikh Gurus. One Sikh family asserted that a modern *sant* of Punjab had on a visit in the city cured a young girl from cancer by providing her a particular hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib to listen to. The family maintained that only *gurbani* has healing powers, but the *sant* possessed knowledge to select the particular hymn to make the girl well. People may speak of a *sant* as if he indeed was a personal Guru, even if most still maintain the delicate distinction between the concept of a *sant* and that of a Guru. The former term denotes a high grade of spiritual progression of a human who has been graced with knowledge to mediate the true essence of *gurbani* – the present Guru – and thus can be seen as the perfected devotee in service of the Guru and the community. A com-

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<sup>368</sup> For the pan-Indian understanding of the term *sant*, see Schomer & McLeod 1987. For a Sikh interpretation of the word, consult McLeod 2000: 157.

mon title used for a female equivalent – a woman graced with spiritual knowledge and powers – is *Mata ji*, or “respected mother.”

### MOTIVES AND EDUCATIONS

The decision to go into any of the above mentioned vocations may be prompted by a range of motives. Most of the Sikh performers employed in the gurdwaras have had other employments and work experiences before they decided to go into the religious field. The head *granthi* at Nichibagh Gurdwara, for instance, earlier worked as a tailor in his home village in Bihar and maintained his skill as a side line by sewing Sikh drawers (*kachhaira*) – one of the five symbols initiated Sikhs should wear – to community members. The assistant *granthi* was originally a Hindu who worked as a photographer before he converted to Sikhism and moved into the gurdwara. Similarly, a musician and member of a *ragi jatha* in Varanasi said his attraction to devotional Sikh music motivated not only his choice of career but also his decision to become a Sikh. He was brought up in a Hindu family and converted to Sikhism against the consent of his family. The majority of paid *sevadars* in the gurdwaras originated from the lower strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy and had been engaged in caste-determined occupations, like carpenters (*tarkhan*), leather workers (*chamar*), washer men (*jado*), or ironsmiths (*lohar*), before their formal adoption of a Sikh identity. The gurdwara often functions as a haven for people who have been exposed to discrimination or outcast from the social network of their families.

As the way of living and working inside a gurdwara requires a high degree of morality, responsibility, and discipline, those who make the final choice to dedicate their lives to religious professions are often driven by strong emotional forces, whether these are of a purely spiritual character or evoked in response to personal experiences of social injustices. A *kathakar* from Rajasthan who visited Varanasi in 2000 related he was a businessman in Bihar from the 1970s. He recalled how his life changed drastically in 1984 during anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. His shop was set on fire by the mob and all his capital resources were destroyed within a couple of hours. In his own wordings, this moment signified a “change in his heart”. Explaining his personal loss from a broader political perspective he said, “Two Sikhs did wrong and for that people tortured a whole community. This is not justice.” The experience made him leave the trading occupation. Impoverished he resorted to the local gurdwara, at which he lived and did service for almost ten years. The personal tragedy impelled him to study religion and to earn his livelihood he became a traveling expounder and propagandist of Sikhism.

A similar story about how experiences of loss and suffering turned into a vocation was told by the venerable Giani Sant Singh Maskin, who worked as a *kathakar* for almost fifty years and gained world fame before his death in 2004. The private TV channel ETC used to televise his *katha* performances daily to over eighty-six countries – thirty minutes in the morning after the program from Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar and thirty minutes after sunset. Most of his *kathas* are today mass-produced on

audiocassettes and distributed worldwide.<sup>369</sup> Accompanied with *ragi* groups, Maskin used to deliver *katha* over the whole India for ten months and for the remaining part of the year toured abroad. In an interview I had with him during a two-day program in Varanasi in 2001 he gave a personal account of the motives for choosing the *kathakar* career:

I am from the Western part of Punjab, which today is in Pakistan. The Tahsil was Lucky Marwat, district Bhanno near Peshawar. I was in school when the partition took place. There was a big massacre in my village. Only two families survived. My family was one of them. I got separated from my parents when I arrived in India by train, but could meet with them later. I have seen massacres and killings. Wherever the train stopped I saw the same things over and over again. I saw trains that were full with dead bodies...

[...] In school we had been given religious education (*dharm viddaya*). After seeing these things, I felt something. I was also a poet. Poets are always emotional and my emotions went to the side of God. I met with my parents but did not stay long with them. I left the house for almost ten years. I met Sant Balwant Singh and followed him for about ten years, and came back to my family in 1956. From that time I started to do *katha*. When I got back to my family my father expired and my sister got married. My mother was very sad. She had been crying for ten years. She decided to arrange my marriage. I was the only son of my parents...

[...] It is like this. Without the experience of suffering no one will come on the path of God. That was my experience at that time. It still is. I know how heavy sorrows (*dukh*) can be. This is the world of sorrows. After realizing this, a person will start to go on the path of God. There is a *shabad* of Guru Nanak ji, which says "this is the world of sorrows (*dukh*)". When you are born with that, then you will walk towards God.

His early religious disposition, in combination with the deeply imprinted traumatic experiences of the partition in 1947, resulted in the vocation to dedicate his life to religious teaching. The two above examples illustrate how personal experiences of loss became emotional turning points that incited spiritual quests and drove individuals into religious professions. They experienced a strong vocation to pursue knowledge and teach others of the Guru's teaching.

Far from all performers, however, have had similar experiences of instigation but simply seek the religious professions to combine devotion and services to the Guru with career opportunities. Younger *ragis* especially said their early interests in

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<sup>369</sup> His cassette company *Shabad Sagar* has become a main supplier of audio-recorded Sikh *kirtan*.

music and religion sometimes made them oppose the future plans drawn up by their parents, which involved college and university studies or occupations in line with family traditions. For a Sikh man in his mid-twenties the pressure from his family to earn a livelihood made him accept the offer to become a member of *ragi jatha* moving to Varanasi, even if he at the time worked with computers and had no intentions of becoming a performer. A younger musician who already in his early teens wished to be a *ragi* confirmed that his family indeed approved of and encouraged his decision, while they emphasized the importance of formal education, even in a religious profession. The young man gained admission to the *Shahid Sikh Missionary College* in Amritsar where, after he completed a degree, was incorporated into a *ragi jatha* dispatched to Varanasi. Unemployment and the need to support oneself and the family seem to be one of the many reasons why many performers develop their initial interest in the performing arts into full-time occupations. When a *pracharak* in Varanasi district commented on the motives that rural people may have to sign up to missionary courses that will grant a career in any of the religious professions, he simply said: "People who want to go into this field need education up to tenth grade. Those boys who come to me have completed school, but they are unemployed. They need something to do."

#### TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SCHOOLING

Although the ways and procedures for pursuing a career in any of the Sikh performer categories (*granthi*, *kathakar*, *pracharak* and *ragi*) appears to be numerous, there are primarily two interdependent means that stand out in the interviews with local performers in Varanasi: to attend courses at any of the Sikh educational institutions in the Punjab or elsewhere and by attaching oneself as an apprentice to some successful performer and knowledgeable teacher in *gurbani* and the various performance arts. Scholars have suggested that the development of modern education and schooling in South Asia has led to a deskilling of traditional systems of apprenticeship in which individuals claim to have been taught by teachers. With the movement towards modernity the transmission of knowledge, which previously was a collective process carried out in the context of personal relationships, has been relocated to institutions in which knowledge acquisition is an individual and impersonal process dis-embedded from the total environment of performances.<sup>370</sup> Although the twentieth century saw the emergence of modern Sikh educational institutions and the transformation of historical centers of learning, these adjustments have not necessarily outmanoeuvred traditional forms of schooling on the individual level. The typical pattern among aspiring Sikh performers is to combine formal studies at an educational institution with practical training under the supervision of senior colleagues who provide the pupil access to networks of senior performers and the basis for work and reputation.

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<sup>370</sup> Simpson 1997: 51.



The performers I interviewed had gained interest in the Sikh religion and especially the musical tradition of *kirtan* at an early age, learnt the Gurmukhi script at the local gurdwara, and from there continued to larger Sikh educational centers for formal courses. Contemporary gurdwaras usually accommodate some kind of educational establishment attached to the sanctuary, be it in the form of individual tuitions and training carried out by a dedicated few, a small school, or the more institutionalized *Gurmat Vidhyala*, which literally are “Schools of the Guru’s teaching” established especially for training of young men and women in language, recitation, exegesis, history, and devotional singing and music. Except for prestigious educational centers like Amritsar and Damdama Sahib, of which the latter developed into a leading centre of exegesis and training of Sikh scholars and officiants during the seventeenth century,<sup>371</sup> there are today various modern Sikh training institutes all over northern India that have adopted the form and structure of the Western educational systems imported during colonial times. Many of the *pracharaks* and *granthis* who were operating in rural areas of Varanasi district said they had completed two or three years-long courses either at *Shahid Sikh Missionary College* at Amritsar, established by the SGPC, or other centers such as *Sikh Missionary College* in Ludhiana and *Gurmat Mission College* in Roopar.<sup>372</sup> To set general standards for all who intend to work in the religious field the admission to missionary courses usually requires that the aspirant has passed tenth grade of primary school and taken up an *Amritdhari* identity. If the individual student successfully completes the course he or she will receive a *giani* diploma, a formal certificate verifying that the student has passed examinations. The graduating student is permissible to expound *gurbani* and propagate the Sikh religion. A diploma from any of these institutions normally guarantees employment in a gurdwara. In several cases a preliminary training conducted by elderly propagandists on the grassroot level precedes the recruitment and admission to these schools.

In Varanasi district, the *pracharak* Jaswant Singh Mastak had since the 1960s travelled around in villages for propaganda of Sikhism to spur young and unemployed Hindu men to apply for *giani* courses in the Punjab. After Mastak had completed a missionary course at Amritsar, the educational body of the Sikh organization SGPC – *Dharam Pracharak Committee* – sent him off for propaganda work in different rural areas in the state of Uttar Pradesh between 1965 and 1972. In villages scattered around Varanasi Mastak himself provided tuitions in *gurbani* and the Gurmukhi script to Hindu villagers converting to the Sikh religion, before they continued to Punjab to pursue a *giani* certificate. Up to the beginning of the 1990s the nearby pilgrimage centre of Patna Sahib (Bihar) ran a *Gurmat Vidhyala* that offered a two-year long course for becoming *granthis* and *ragis* under direction of Bhai Iqbal Singh from Damdama Sahib. Two of the reciters in Varanasi, recruited for this course, informed

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<sup>371</sup> Mann 2005: 12.

<sup>372</sup> The educational activities at the old Sikh educational institutions and the modern Sikh Missionary Colleges, and how these institutions respond to modernization and globalization processes in the Punjab, would be an interesting study in itself. Today many of the educational institutes operate on the Internet (See e.g., [www.sikhmissionarycollege.org](http://www.sikhmissionarycollege.org)).

that propagandists from Patna Sahib used to go around in the villages to offer training to boys who were studying Gurmukhi in the local gurdwaras. As I was told, the religious education at Patna Sahib was wide-ranging and adjusted to the ability and talent of the individual student: in addition to readings from different Sikh texts and oral practices in enunciation and intonation of *gurbani* hymns, the curriculum included studies in Sikh history, vocal and musical exercises in *kirtan*, and practical training in performing the different worship acts in the Sikh liturgies. To be prepared for a future career in the gurdwara, the apprentices were expected to achieve proficiency in a number of arts.

In addition there are several Sikh music schools, so-called *Gurmat Kirtan Vidhyale*, in the different parts of Northern India for students with particular interest in Sikh *kirtan*. Some of these schools are attached to central Sikh centers, such as the renowned *Gurmat Kirtan Vidhyala* at Amritsar and Paonta Sahib,<sup>373</sup> whereas other private music centers provide education and training of Sikh music under various degrees of formality. Depending on the talent of the individual student, courses in Sikh devotional music at any of the educational institutions may span over three to five years, after which the student will receive a diploma testifying eligibility to the profession of a *ragi*. A common method for pursuing performance skill among local Sikh musicians was to be to study Sikh texts through the gurdwara and simultaneously learn classical North Indian music, folk tunes, and styles under the guidance of local musicians in their home area. In these cases a *ragi* examination awarded by any of the Sikh educational institutions often functions as a license to generate work opportunities, even if the practical training in music will continue for years thereafter.

Apart from institutionalized training it is common to serve apprenticeship under a senior performer as a disciple. Personal biographies of performers working in the gurdwaras quite often contain elements of senior preceptors who have served as sources of inspiration and molded their art during years of training. A senior *granthi* in Varanasi originating from Ludhiana, Bhai Sukhdev, recalled how a Nirmala *sant* encouraged him to learn *kirtan* and *gurbani* in his childhood. After completing secondary school at the age of fifteen he obtained work at a factory producing spare parts for bicycles. In the evenings he used to take private lessons in Sikh *kirtan* from a blind *ragi* performer and at the same time learnt the art of *gurbani* recitation from a *giani*. After several years of training he was given the opportunity to perform in a *ragi* group and toured around India for about four years. On the way back to Punjab from a program in Calcutta in 1977 the group passed by the gurdwaras in Varanasi, which at that time was in need of musicians. After a *kirtan* performance, highly appraised by the community, it was decided that Bhai Sukhdev should return to Varanasi for an appointment the following year. Initially he worked as an assistant *granthi* in Varanasi and after four years was promoted to head *granthi*, a post he still occupied at the time of my fieldwork. In the end of the 1980s Bhai Sukhdev himself became a tutor

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<sup>373</sup> Other musical institutes mentioned by my interlocutors were *Shahig Sikh Missionary College* and the *Central Khalsa Jitim*, both of which are also located at Amritsar.

for an aspiring *granthi*, Bhai Jiopal, who had completed one year of the *giani* course at the *Gurmat Vidhyale* in Patna. Under supervision of Bhai Sukhdev, Bhai Jiopal worked as an assistant *granthi* in Gurubagh Gurdwara for eight years and during the period of apprenticeship developed a very affectionate relationship to his teacher. Bhai Sukhdev stirred up Bhai Jiopal's interest for the profession and taught him various techniques on how to memorize *gurbani* hymns and fully exploit the vocal powers for recitations. "You listen to *Granthi ji* and try to recite in that way. You get it by practice, memory and practice, day by day... Because of his company I got my voice and my way of reciting. People were confused and said our voices are similar," Bhai Jiopal said. Gradually Bhai Jiopal took responsibility for the daily duties in the gurdwara, and, when considered qualified, he was appointed to the post of head *granthi* at Nichibagh Gurdwara. This traditional model of education seems to be a quite common way of pursuing a career in all the categories of Sikh performers. One starts as an assistant *granthi* under the supervision of a senior reciter and by years of practice work one's way up to become a fully-fledged *granthi*, or even head *granthi*. An aspiring expounder (*kathakar*) or propagandist (*pracharak*) may follow a successful and knowledgeable teacher for decades to observe and listen to discourses, take notes and analyze how the senior performer structures interpretations of Guru Granth Sahib and commentaries on Sikh history.<sup>374</sup>

It still remains that formal education and a letter of recommendation from any of the modern Sikh educational institutes are an easier springboard into the career, especially for *granthis* and *ragis* dependent on permanent employment in the gurdwara. When the local gurdwara committee is in need of a *ragi jatha* or *granthi* they will advertise in newspapers and contact the Sikh educational institutes which today send trained performers to Sikh congregations all over India. The Sikh missionary colleges regularly organize camps for a week or two during which both students and teachers get a chance to demonstrate their skill and establish contacts for possible future employment. Members of the gurdwara committee in Varanasi were frequently attending religious programs in the Punjab and elsewhere to listen to musicians, who were later invited for festival days. Another popular means through which people may evaluate a *ragi* group or reciter is tape recordings. Since cassettes are produced and distributed at a cheap rate, established performers of local and regional fame can easily promote their artistic skill through demo-tapes intended for devotional practices. Others, who lack formal education and other means to exhibit their qualifications, may still have good chances of employment if a known community member will stand surety for their ability. Before making a contract of employment the local Sikh community is likely to organize a trial performance when the congregation is invited to evaluate how the performer behaves to community members and how he

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<sup>374</sup> When Giani Sant Singh Maskin visited Varanasi in 2001 one of his student since 1978 was video recording his exegetical exposition (*katha*) for the purpose of analysing and learning from the performance.

reads *Ardas*, takes the daily *Hukam*, and sings *Kirtan*. Both his talent and moral disposition are evaluated.

#### CLINGING TO THE GURU'S FEET

Anyone who intends to work as *granthi* or *pathi* in the gurdwara must pass through a ceremony called *charni lagna*. In a literal sense the compound means "to be attached to the feet", and entails the common body symbolism of receiving a blissful touch of the Guru's feet (*charan*). Whereas the feet are culturally defined as the most impure part of the human body, clinging to the Guru's feet is the most favorable act of submission for the devotee. The practice of *charni lagna* is today shaped as a ritualized "test" in reading the Gumukhi script and orally reproducing *gurbani* which is open for both male and female laypersons and prospective reciters. When the novitiate passes the test, he or she will be considered a true disciple granted permission to handle the Guru Granth Sahib and perform recitations.

The core acts of *charni lagna* conducted in the gurdwara follows a rather standardized pattern. Either the novitiate or someone in the community sets up an "open" recitation of the whole scripture (*Khulla path*) which he or she will commence in the presence of an experienced *granthi*. The choice of *Khulla path* for this occasion is due to the broken character of this recitation. Only the reading and enunciation ability of the novitiate is tested and he or she should be able to stop after a given number of recited verses. The apprentice should carefully wash his or her hands and feet and bring the Sikh sacred pudding (*karah prashad*) as an offering to the Guru. Before the actual reading starts the *granthi* reads six stanzas of the composition *Anand Sahib* (stanza 1 – 5, and 40), followed by the *Ardas*, in which he asks permission to carry out *charni lagna* and pleads for divine support to read without errors. The prayer authorizes the trainee reciter to be seated on the scriptural throne behind Guru Granth Sahib. Subsequently the *granthi* will ask the apprentice to unfold the cloths covering the scripture and take a *Hukam*. The senior *granthi* will then read the five first verses of the scripture and let the new-beginner repeat the same passage under observation. He will listen carefully to the recitations and ensure that the pronunciation is correct. In case the novice makes any mistakes he will reveal this and in a subsequent prayer ask the Guru forgiveness. The recitation may continue, but only the reading of these five verses will be supervised by the *granthi*. Afterwards *karah prashad* will be served to friends and family members in company with the new reciter, who is now "attached to the Guru's feet" and permitted to carry out recitations of Guru Granth Sahib.

It should be noted that the ceremony of *charni lagna* may just as well be executed in domestic settings for anyone who desires it and does not necessitate an *Amritdhari* identity. A middle-aged woman, for instance, got *charni lagna* under supervision of her father and said the ceremony is like swearing an oath to the Guru. Just as her father kept Guru Granth Sahib in her native home, she and her husband had built a gurdwara at their house and supervised their elder son when he was "presented to the Guru's feet", she said. The ceremony ritually marks the beginning of regular reci-

tation practices, which from a religious point of view is to submit oneself and remain clinging to the Guru's feet as a true disciple.

### DUTIES AND QUALIFICATIONS

In the semi-structured interviews I asked the respondents to ponder over the duties and qualifications of the various specialists working inside the gurdwara, and the *granthi*s in particular. What credentials and responsibilities do people ascribe to these performers? From my side the inquiry was an attempt to get an idea of the competence expected from performers and their performances, and by which norms this competence was evaluated by community members. I also wanted to understand the mediating role of *granthi*. Why, for instance, would so many Sikhs, well acquainted with sacred texts, go to the gurdwara as clients and in exchange for monetary donations let the *granthi* perform an *Ardas* on behalf of their family instead of just reading the text themselves? In the following I will illustrate how laypeople in Varanasi associated the profession of a *granthi* with the possession of linguistic and ritual knowledge as well as his moral disposition and ethical conducts.

In the first place the profession and skill of a *granthi* is evaluated by the linguistic proficiency, that is, his ability to read and recite *gurbani* accurately and fluently. All *gurbani* hymns rendered in the daily liturgies of a gurdwara are always reproduced in verbatim since the words are perceived as the Guru's utterances transmitted directly through the reciter. The profession of a *granthi* is more located in the field of enunciation, that is, he should utter and articulate the sacred *gurbani* words. He is expected to have internalized *gurbani* and other texts used in Sikh liturgies to such an extent that he can more or less tap verses and hymns from his memory whenever the need for recitations occurs. Another aspect of the linguistic knowledge relates to the qualities of his recitations. Many informants emphasized that recitations of a *granthi* should be *shuddh*, "correct" and "pure", which in these conversational contexts had dual meanings: the external qualities of recitations and the internal devotional stance of the *granthi* when he is performing the texts. Learning to become a *granthi* is to acquire the technique of enunciating and intoning the words and powerful rhythms within *gurbani* texts. In order to evaluate a recitation as *shuddh* the *granthi* is expected to articulate each word in a clear and correct manner, without contaminating the words by mispronunciations. The emphasis on correct enunciation of *gurbani* is referred back to the exalted status of *gurbani*, but also to the communicative function of recitations: listeners should be able to hear and follow each word of the recited verses. *Shuddh path* is furthermore evaluated by the *granthi*'s ability to perform hymns in an aesthetically appealing way. Almost all religious texts to be recited or sung in Sikh ceremonies follow specific patterns of intonation and melodies that have become conventional in the Sikh society. The oft-employed "singing" style of recitations is a way "to bring stress and pitch and pause into a fixed relationship to the words".<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Tedlock 1983: 234.

The *granthi* is expected to know and perform *gurbani* in accordance with these formal rules. Comprised in the notion of “pure” recitation is also the *granthi*’s inner devotional and moral stance in the moment he takes *gurbani* words in his mouth. To make recitations “pure” he should not have any ulterior motives or desires more than being fully engaged in Guru’s words. “*Shuddh* recitations is to do recitation accurately without looking at people”, one woman said when she explained the required devotional disposition.

In addition to skill in enunciation, my interlocutors observed the importance of understanding the semantic content of hymns to explicate meanings to community members. In the daily programs the *granthi* may, for instance, give shorter expositions of the *Hukam* taken from Guru Granth Sahib, either for the whole congregation or in response to individual requests. Even if devotees do not generally anticipate more comprehensive exegetical elaborations on Guru Granth Sahib from the *granthi*, but credit this undertaking to *ragi jathas* and *kathakar*, they do presume and consider his knowledge of subtler meanings of the text crucial for quite another reason: the *granthi* possesses knowledge to select *gurbani* hymns which are considered appropriate and favorable to recite in particular ceremonies and situations, often to seek divine support and protection. As I will describe more in the chapters to follow, the *granthi* inserts individual verses drawn from Guru Granth Sahib when he performs the Sikh supplication *Ardas*. The content of the individual verse selected often displays a semantic relationship to the situation or the desired end for which the verse is recited. Community members frequently ask the *granthi* to guide them on *gurbani* verses suitable for a particular life situation because he has pursued the required knowledge of relating sacred texts with social contexts. This ability to make *gurbani* verses perpetually relevant to changing human conditions leads us to another aspect of the expected skill of the performers working inside the gurdwara – the possession of liturgical knowledge.

Whether the *granthi* is operating inside the gurdwara, out in public spaces, or at private houses he is expected to know how to perform all the different Sikh worship acts in accordance with conventional liturgical orders and be able to adjust the acts to changing situations. His expertise is both the semantic and syntactic aspects of ceremonies. He can execute the separate worship acts with considerations to time and space and knows how the acts are to be embedded in ritual structures. A nearly unanimous opinion among my interlocutors considered the *granthi* responsible for accurate and timely performances of the daily liturgies in the gurdwara, compared by some to the *pujari* in Hindu temples or the Muslim *mula*. When explaining what they considered to be the duties and qualifications of a *granthi* some would provide summarizing accounts on the separate acts of the daily Sikh liturgies. A middle-aged woman said:

He gets up early in the morning at 3 or 3.30 and does *Prakash* of Guru Granth Sahib ji and takes the divine order [*Hukam*]. To begin with the *Granthi* does recitation of five hymns and *Sukhmani Sahib* in the morn-

ing. He should know the full *Ardas* and he has to do full service [*seva*] to Guru Granth Sahib ji. If there is any program it is the *Granthi's* duty to sit down and do service to Guru Granth Sahib ji. In the evening he will do the reading of *Rahiras Sahib* and *Ardas*, and then *Sukhasan*.

People in general perceive the *granthi* as the principal guardian of the Guru Granth Sahib and his work is explicated in terms of selfless service (*seva*) to the Guru and the Guru's house. "He is the servant of God who takes care of Guru Granth Sahib ji, takes care of the place of Guru Maharaj ji, and there should be no disrespect to Guru ji", a younger man said. The emphasis on ritual precision in the enactment of daily liturgies is justified by the presence of Guru Granth Sahib. The *granthi* ensures that all worship is conducted in ways which will provide the scripture due respect. Ritual knowledge, or the knowing of how to perform ritualized acts, is a product of collective life and belongs to all devotees within the community, but the *granthi* sets the model for the ways to approach and handle the Guru.

The status of a *granthi* is also evaluated after his moral qualities and ethical conducts. As a general rule all people holding positions in the gurdwara are expected to be *Amritdhari* Sikhs who know and observe the normative Sikh regulations and routines in their daily life. The gurdwara staff and community members frequently assert that being an *Amritdhari* by definition guarantees a high level of purity and morals as they are prohibited to consume alcohol and drugs and keep a vegetarian diet consisting of food prepared by other Sikhs. Equally important, they must refrain from extra-marital relations, keep up personal care and display a dignified appearance and behavior. The *granthi* in particular is expected to have inculcated ethical values of the Sikh teaching to behave and lead a life in an exemplary fashion.

The profession of a *granthi* entitles the person occupying the post a public representational role. At public events and in interactions with the surrounding society the *granthi* often works as a representative of the Sikh community. For instance, when the funeral procession of the late Maharaja of Varanasi was taken out from the royal residence at Nadeshar in 2000 the head *granthi* of Gurubagh Gurdwara presented an *Ardas* for the peace of the departed soul and offered the shrouded corpse a robe of honor and a rosary on behalf of the congregation. The *granthi* is expected to personify Sikh ideals, virtues and orthodoxy through his own deeds and way of living. Externally this is expressed in a dignified appearance and avoidance of more dubious activities, such as gambling or attending cinema shows. The *granthi*, like other performers in the gurdwara, should wear attractive but sober traditional *pyjama kurta* dress in neutral shades and a turban in any of the five accepted colors.<sup>376</sup> He should also keep his beard clean and natural without fixing it with hair products. The stipulated dress code was spoken of as a "uniform" which people in service at the Guru's house should wear, whereas "modern" outfits like pants and shirt was the "civil dress" worn on private excursions outside the gurdwara.

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<sup>376</sup> The sanctioned colours of the turban are white, black, saffron, royal blue, and sky blue.

Most of my interlocutors stressed the importance of “good” inner qualities and outer behaviors which in these conversations signified a person who is calm, kind, humble, polite, patient, remains pure in his thoughts, has good intentions, and treats everyone on equal terms irrespective of social and financial status. Considering that the *granthi* interacts daily with community members in various settings and is usually one of the few persons allowed to enter more secluded spaces to officiate ceremonies, his moral qualities are of vital concern to the laity. After childbirth, for example, the *granthi* is one of the few persons permitted to enter the maternity ward or the private bedroom to give the baby the first purifying nectar-water (*amrit*) before it is taken out in public and shown to relatives. The right to enter these spaces demonstrates how the relationship between the *granthi* and community members bears the stamp of trust and confidence in his pure intentions and high morals.

A few interlocutors also provided comments on a “bad” character, that is, what a *granthi* and other performers should not be and desist from doing. As they put it in different wordings, any of the five Sikh vices – lust (*kam*), anger (*krodh*), avarice (*lobh*), worldly attachment (*moh*) and pride (*hankar*) – are connected with great danger and must be controlled. The desire for money is especially a powerful lure. Discourses inside and outside the gurdwara frequently involve morally charged comments on how religious services should not be motivated by financial gains. The ideal performer is the one who never demands or bargains over money but accepts the monetary donation (*dan*) given to him in charity and devotion by the *sangat*. Behind this position lies the idea that all religious activities in the gurdwara should be *seva* and not contaminated by human desires or ostentation. The degree of religiosity of people considered saintly or knowledgeable is often measured by their humble attitude and disinterest in material gains. If employees in the gurdwara would be under any suspicion of greediness, telling lies, or behaving invitingly to female visitors they would not keep their positions very long.

By his continual engagements in devotional practices, the *granthi* was by many perceived to have developed a close relationship to the Guru and thereby had purified his inner self. An elderly Sikh woman expressed this view in the following way:

Those persons who take the name of God are like God. All these people [working in the gurdwara] are taking the name of God, so they become like God. In Sikh religion it says that if your mind/heart [*man*] is *shuddh* you do not have to go around to find God, you just look in the mirror and you will see God. We have to give respect to them [*granthis*] because they are taking the name of God.

Any human whose inner mind and heart is filled with *gurbani* and devotion to God will conduct pure action. This makes one reason as to why lay Sikhs considered the *granthi* suitable for performances of prayers and recitations. He does not merely possess knowledge to perform readings in a proper way, but his spiritual disposition obtained from constant recitations and by dwelling in the space of the Guru is be-



lieved to make his performances more effective. When I asked an elderly Sikh man about the reason for committing readings of the *Ardas* to the *granthi*, he replied:

Any person can do *Ardas*, but we get it done by the *Granthi* because he is the minister (*vazir*) of Guru Granth Sahib ji. When *Ardas* is done by *Granthi ji* it is more important. He takes care of Guru Granth Sahib ji and he is doing readings of *bani*. He is much more pure (*shuddh*). His *Ardas* is listened to quickly.

Far from all Sikhs would agree with this statement and promptly claim that any person performing prayers and recitations from a sincere heart will undoubtedly achieve the same results as those who rely on the *granthi*. No intermediaries are required for establishing devotional links to the Guru and God. But it still remains that people do depend on the *granthi* for prayers because he knows the sacred texts and the proper ritual conducts, which together with his moral and spiritual disposition make his readings more *shuddh* – correct and pure.

## 2.4. THE LIFE OF GURU GRANTH SAHIB

In the Sikh community today there are a set of ceremonies that aim to mark the integration and separation of Guru Granth Sahib in the socio-religious life of human disciples. Traditionally scholars in anthropology and religious studies have used the analytical typology “life-cycle rites” for ritual activities linked to biological or social transfers in the order of human life, however have not extended the term to encompass ritually marked passages in the “life” of objects that are attributed sacred status and even perceived and treated as animated things.<sup>377</sup> Considering the ways in which adherents of various religious traditions handle their sacred texts with the outmost care, scholars have paid surprisingly little attention to the ritual procedures by which religious people ascribe new or renovated texts with social agency and enliven them within the community of humans, or how they give obsolete texts a symbolic treatment similar to an honored guest or family member. Ethnographic notes from different parts of the world seem to suggest that rituals of consecration and the disposal of sacred texts – handwritten and printed – are a crucial aspect of the religious life of people. The design of the rituals directed towards texts will display cultural and historical variations that are dependent on local conceptions of the texts, accessibility of copies, attitudes towards the activity of writing, print technology, and now the existence of virtual publications on the Internet.<sup>378</sup> In a South Asian context, for in-

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<sup>377</sup> For introductory overview of studies on life-cycle rites, consult Bell 1997: 94 – 102.

<sup>378</sup> In the Abrahamic religions, the ritual disposal of manuscripts appears to be a major concern. If the Jewish people in ancient times destroyed or hid damaged handwritten manuscripts to avoid faults in readings, contemporary Jews would most probably bury an aged Torah scroll in a separate grave at the cemetery. Many Muslims on the Indian subcontinent dispose of outworn

stance, Buddhists adopted and still are using various ritual methods for the disposal of Dharma texts containing the teaching of Buddha. To avoid destroying older and damaged manuscripts the texts would be placed within another sacred image (*caitya*) or under newer texts, and sometimes shredded and mixed with building material used for construction of monasteries.<sup>379</sup> Even if the pursuit of writing texts has been considered a low-caste occupation in the oral tradition of Brahmanical Hinduism, followers of the various Bhakti traditions and popular cults in India have given religious scripts a symbolic and devotional treatment analogous to icons of deities and sacralized humans.<sup>380</sup> Living at the riverbank of Ganga in Varanasi I occasionally observed local Hindus consigning malformed or damaged religious texts of smaller and larger sizes to the river.

The very existence of these ritual behaviors suggests that the disposal of sacred texts once consecrated evoke powerful religious values associated with both the spiritual content and the physical form of these texts. In different religious traditions people seem to have all the motives for giving their sacred scriptures a ministration similar to deities or human subjects of exalted status. The physical text may be seen as a positive theophany which reveals words of supernatural origin and embodies a divine presence that has been invoked through series of consecration acts. The religious scripture may be held sacred because it contains a teaching which provides instructions on the way towards salvation and articulates a godly plan for humans. In either case the religious scripture or text is attributed sacrality which points to something supernaturally larger beyond its worldly manifestation. The fear of contamination, misreading, and human neglect are sufficient reasons for giving the text a respectful handling. Through acts and behaviors religious people think they secure and respond best to the sacred nature of the text, but in reality their actions are the ritual management by which they impute sacrality to the text and simultaneously underscore the ethos that this particular text should be treated differently than other books in the profane realm.

In Sikh worship there are ceremonies that seem to serve no other purpose than to venerate the Guru Granth Sahib. The true Guru dwelling within the scriptural

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copies of the Koran in tombs, whereas their co-religionists in Indonesia burn the Arabic writ and all papers containing Koranic verses to pay proper respect to the revealed divine words (Information on Muslim practices in Indonesia was provided by Andre Möller, Lund University). At the end of the twentieth century Christians in Sweden were similarly burning unusable Bibles on the plea that the Holy script should not be sacrilegiously thrown into the refuse (personal communication with Anders Jalert, Lund University).

<sup>379</sup> See e.g. Walser 2005, Veidlinger 2006.

<sup>380</sup> In consecration rituals of crafted statues of Hindu deities, for instance, the image is considered an ordinary matter until the supernatural power is ritually invoked and thereby made present. Through ritual acts the object is believed to be transformed into a manifestation of the deity or supreme teacher which can be seen, worshipped, and treated with the greatest respect. When the Hindu deities have fulfilled their temporal duties of attendance during festivals or in temples they are ceremonially immersed into a river to be dissolved by water.

pages is eternal and will never be extinct, but the theory of the Guru's embodiment suggests that the scriptural form of the Guru is subjected to bodily change. Like human souls are believed to transmigrate between different body forms, the Sikh scripture comes alive during the printing process in order to embody the Word-Guru. When the scriptural body is worn out and has completed a life-time it is reverentially disposed in a cremation ceremony. In between these two events the Guru Granth Sahib assumes an active role to make the Guru's agency present and mediate a revelation in the social life of the Sikhs. The ethnographic descriptions below attempt to illustrate the ways by which Sikhs create the life of the Guru Granth Sahib. Cloaked in royal symbols and acts the scripture is printed, transported, and installed at the gurdwara and the house like a worldly sovereign. The Guru Granth Sahib – as the present body-form of the eternal Guru – has its own life-cycle marked by religious events.

#### PRINTING AND DISTRIBUTION

When the printing technology emerged on the Indian scene in the early nineteenth century adherents of the various religious traditions apparently took up quite different stances towards the new technique which rendered it possible to planographically print sacred words and signs on paper in machines – a technical process that eventually would facilitate for mass-production and public access of religious texts.<sup>381</sup> In the Punjab Christian missionaries in Ludhiana set up the first printing press in the 1830s to publish evangelical literature and print the Bible in Punjabi, Hindi, and other vernaculars.<sup>382</sup> Even though missionaries initially monopolized the press and Gurmukhi typefaces, Sikh intellectuals were receptive to the new method and during the second part of the nineteenth century enthusiastically took use of the print technology within religious and secular domains of the society. To all appearances the first printed edition of the Guru Granth Sahib in Gurmukhi script appeared in 1864 and was a lithographic reproduction of the *Damdama* version published by Lala Harsukh Rai at Ko-

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<sup>381</sup> In a study of Tamil bow songs, Blackburn shows that only palm-leaf manuscripts inscribed with iron stylus are controlled by priests in temples and used in ritual performances of texts. Printed versions of the same texts are not attributed any ritual status or efficacy simply because they are mass-produced and publicly assessable. "Ritual power, then, lies not simply in the fixity of the text, but also in the cultural control over the production and dissemination of the text", he summarizes (Blackburn 1988: xxi). The ritual status of written texts is not a consequence of modern print technologies but continues to rest on the ecclesiastical control and restricted access to handwritten texts. The case of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* is quite the opposite, as Lutgendorf illustrates. The first published edition of the epic appeared in Calcutta in 1810, and after 1860 different publishing houses printed more than seventy editions. This development culminated in the establishment of Gita Press, which from the beginning of the twentieth century became a leading publisher of *Ramcharitmanas* (Lutgendorf 1991: 61).

<sup>382</sup> Oberoi 1995: 220.

hinoor Press in Lahore.<sup>383</sup> Three decades later at least a dozen additional reprints of the Sikh scripture had come into existence and the number of printing presses in the Punjab exceeded to more than a hundred.<sup>384</sup> With the turn of the century the city of Amritsar developed into a centre for publications of sacred Sikh literature. Established in 1875, the private publishing house of *Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh* grew into a major producer of the scripture, initially reproducing handwritten manuscripts and later shifted to the lithographic process for production of religious literature to be sold in the bazaar outside of Harimandir Sahib.<sup>385</sup>

Although the autonomous Sikh organization *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC) was formed in 1925 to provide a self-reliant system for management of Sikh shrines and gurdwaras in the state of Punjab, the organization came to branch out in theological and political directions and perceive itself as a democratically based religious “government” of the broader Sikh community with jurisdiction far beyond the state borders. Three years after its inception the SGPC adopted a resolution to produce an authoritative printed version of the Guru Granth Sahib to make the scripture easily accessible to common people – a decision which in the decades to follow resulted in four different printed versions of the Sikh scripture.<sup>386</sup> To control the production of Guru Granth Sahib the SGPC established its own printing press in Amritsar – the *Golden Offset Press* – in the year of 1949. The press was situated in the basement of the five-storied building of *Gurdwara Ramsar*, a location which according to the Sikh tradition is laden with symbolic meanings: the gurdwara is believed to mark the exact spot where the fifth Guru Arjan and his scribe Bhai Gurdas pitched a camp in the peaceful forest nearby Harimandir Sahib and started to work on the compilation of the Sikh scripture. The place of manufacturing modern scriptures in print thus indexes the site at which the important manuscript – the *Kartarpur pothi* – came into being four hundred years back. The first printed version of the scripture in one single volume, intended for ceremonial use, was issued in 1952.

Scholars with various degrees of nostalgia for ancient oral-aural transmission of texts have suggested that the new technique of moving words into the visual spaces of fixed printed texts gave rise to major cultural changes and political control of the written word. Ong (1988) among others has argued that the manuscript culture preceding the printed word was mainly oral in character since handwritten manuscripts

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<sup>383</sup> Mann 2001: 125.

<sup>384</sup> Oberoi 1995: 275. For details of the succeeding printed versions of Guru Granth Sahib, see Pashaura Singh 2000: 232 ff.

<sup>385</sup> Today *Chattar Singh Jivan Singh* asserts that they were the first to publish a printed version of Guru Granth Sahib in which words were separated from each other, i.e., in *padchhed* format. See the publisher’s web site on the internet: [www.csjs.com](http://www.csjs.com). Other Amritsar-based publishers are *Jawahar Singh Kirpal Singh* and *The Singh Brothers*, the latter of which started in the 1940s and has specialized in religious literature in Punjabi and English. See the publisher’s web site at: [www.singhbrothers.com](http://www.singhbrothers.com).

<sup>386</sup> For the technical details of these editions and the controversies they instigated in the Sikh community, see Mann 2001: 125 ff.

were hard to read and required that large textual portions were committed to memory. As manuscripts often contained subjective utterances in the form of glosses and comments in the margins they “were in dialogue with the world outside their own borders”.<sup>387</sup> The effect of the print culture implied a transfer of subjective utterances into lettered objects: “In this new world [print culture], the book was less like an utterance, and more like a thing. Manuscript cultures had preserved a feeling for a book as a kind of utterance, an occurrence in the course of conversation, rather than as an object.”<sup>388</sup> Since the new printing technology came to fix written words within demarcated visual spaces it gave texts a sense of “closure” and “physical completeness”.<sup>389</sup> From a purely typographical viewpoint, the printing technology made it possible to control words and put them down on exact places on a page and in relation to other words.

Handwritten copies of the various manuscript versions of the Sikh scripture often contained similar scribal “dialogues” that were included before or after the actual reproduction of *gurbani* compositions, but still within the corpus of the sacred folios.<sup>390</sup> It is quite possible that notes gradually diminished when the scripture was authorized to the office of the Guru in the eighteenth century and was fully removed when the Guru Granth Sahib appeared in print from the nineteenth century.<sup>391</sup> A widely accepted viewpoint in Sikhism purports that the Sikh scripture was forever sealed subsequent to the inclusion of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s composition in the 1680s and Guru Gobind Singh’s canonization of the text at Damdama Sahib in 1705 – 1706.<sup>392</sup> Although the exact reasons for the Sikh appreciation of the modern printing technology were probably multiple, the new technique made it possible for Sikh authorities to more forcefully achieve one homogenized and authoritative version of

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<sup>387</sup> Ong 2000(1982): 130.

<sup>388</sup> Ong 2000(1982): 123.

<sup>389</sup> Ong 2000(1982): 130.

<sup>390</sup> Typically the scribe would not mention his own name in the folio, probably as a sign of reverence to the text and the divinely inspired writing process, but instead included the death dates of the Gurus, time and date for the completion of the recording, the ink formula (*shahi vidi*), and sometimes apologies for unintentional flaws. The “ink formula” would give the exact recipe for making the ink. For instance, in an undated handwritten manuscript preserved in Nichibagh Gurdwara at Varanasi (probably from the nineteenth century) the scribe writes that the ink was made of gum from the Acacia tree, 111 mg amethyst, 111 mg gold powder, and lampblack made of mustard oil.

<sup>391</sup> As Mann suggests, those manuscripts copied after the compilation of the scripture at Anandpur in the 1680s did not contain the date on which the texts were copied. This, he argues, indicates the exalted status the Sikh scripture had gained within the Sikh community in the Punjab; it was considered inappropriate to enter scribal notes in a scripture which was attributed the status of the Guru. In other geographical areas where the authority of the scripture was still unknown, scribes would continue to incorporate notes and additional texts in the beginning or the end of the main text according to their own likings (Mann 2001: 123 – 124).

<sup>392</sup> Support for this traditional account is found in the early nineteenth century text *Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi* (see Pashuara Singh 2000: 222).

Guru Granth Sahib, devoid of scribal elements, and simultaneously facilitate a large-scale production of standardized copies to make the scripture accessible to common people and congregations at distant locations.<sup>393</sup> The new print culture offered modern Sikhs effective means to protect the scriptural corpus by confining *gurbani* verses to well-arranged printed spaces and control that scriptures intended for religious use were duplicated in conformity with the manuscripts sanctioned and sealed by the Sikh Gurus.

Unlike hesitant responses to print culture among other religious communities in India, the Sikhs did not believe that the process of committing their Guru-scripture to print would eliminate its religious status and efficacy. Quite on the contrary, they welcomed the opportunity to once and for all set a final physical “completeness” of Guru Granth Sahib and remove utterances of human editors, but without reducing the text to merely a “thing”. The effect of print culture in Sikhism provides a challenging case to theories which claim that access to printed texts and higher rates of literacy developed at the expense of oral dimensions. Since it was possible to produce Guru Granth Sahib at a reasonable cost and thereby make copies accessible to the literate masses, the printing technology preconditioned both democratization and increase of Sikh worship. Families with sufficient means and motivation could easily obtain printed editions to establish domestic gurdwaras according to individual choosing. Although Sikh worship was to be centred on a printed text, the Sikhs preserved a feeling for the book as utterances of the Gurus – *gurbani* – which continue to be orally transmitted through recitations and songs. Public Sikh discourses during the twentieth century do therefore not question the *raison d’être* of having the sacred words committed to print, but display a deep concern with the preservation of the content and form of sanctioned manuscripts and the ritual handling of printed texts during the processes of production and distribution.

#### STANDARDIZING CONTENT AND FORM

In the initial phase of SGPCs press history one crucial matter to decide upon was the selection of manuscripts to be used for a standardized printed edition. In the manuscript culture prior to the nineteenth century there had been several versions of the scripture in existence which displayed differences in terms of form and content. Some of the handwritten copies were also held apocryphal by the larger Sikh community.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Emphasizing the political effects of print technology in the nineteenth century colonial context, Oberoi suggests that the print culture in the Punjab enabled a communication across different geographical and social groups and initially promoted homogenization in modes of thinking. Printed words became carriers of social relationships and sources of ideas, and endowed authors with the power to circulate messages anonymously and without any direct public contact. As Oberoi strongly argues, the print culture became a powerful weapon for a new group of intellectuals who began to dominate and monopolize the representation of history, ideas, texts, and symbols of Sikhism in order to mould a modern Sikh identity (Oberoi 1995: 272 ff).

<sup>394</sup> The so-called *Banno* version of the Sikh scripture belongs to this category. This manuscript is named after a disciple to Guru Arjan, Bhai Banno, who according to Sikh history made the first

When SGPC released the first one-volume edition of Guru Granth Sahib in the 1950s the text was based on the *Kartarpur pothi*, the manuscript compiled by Guru Arjan, and the later *Damdama bir*, the manuscript ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh. In the storm of debates that followed this publication the status of the early manuscripts came into focus and continued to be a matter of dispute among Sikh intellectuals for an extended period of time. Sikh reformers opposing the SGPC editions were of the opinion that solely the Damdama manuscript, sanctioned by Guru Gobind Singh, was the Guru to be consulted for the production of an authoritative printed text. The SGPC, however, continued to print new editions of the scripture based on the two key sources.<sup>395</sup>

The second one-volume edition of Guru Granth Sahib published by the SGPC in the 1970s was accompanied with similarly heated debates. This time the printing system of the Gurmukhi script was the bone of contention. The widely practiced writing method in the manuscript culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was to write down words joined to one another in continuous lines without any breaks. Up to the twentieth century, this writing system was used for handwritten manuscripts and the earliest printed versions of the Guru Granth Sahib. At first the SGPC decided to preserve the original chain-script, but later approved to release the scripture in *padchhed*, or the “break-word” system. Traditionalists considered the new system of separating words a sacrilegious undertaking, equivalent to a dissection of the Guru’s “body”, whereas modernists perceived it as a necessary adjustment of an antiquated scribal tradition that would facilitate easier and more accurate readings of the text among all literate Sikhs. The later position came to gain public currency and today most scriptures installed and used in homes and gurdwaras follow the *padchhed* format with separated words.

Another important development of Guru Granth Sahib in print was the standard pagination of 1430 which private publishing houses and the SGPC adopted during the twentieth century. The consecutive numbering of pages in handwritten manuscripts and the earliest printed editions of the Sikh scripture had varied considerably between different reproductions.<sup>396</sup> As Pashuara Singh (2000) suggests, the

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copy of the *Kartarpur pothi* which was rejected by the Guru because of textual discrepancies. Already in 1881 the *Banno* version was printed in Gujranwala, however the edition did not win approval among the Sikh masses. For details on this manuscript, consult Pashaura Singh 2000: 231, and Mann 2001: 69 – 70, 127.

<sup>395</sup> Mann 2001: 126.

<sup>396</sup> Four handwritten manuscripts preserved in Nichibagh Gurdwara at Varanasi, for instance, have different paginations: one undated manuscript amounts to 814 pages; another folio dated to 1872 (*samvat* 1929) comprises 848 pages; a third undated manuscript, which has *Jap Sahib* included at the end, spans over 860 pages; and the last manuscript, which local Sikhs claim to be of seventeenth century origin, encompasses 945 pages. As noted in the cover of the two latter manuscripts, the texts were provided with a new binding in 1965 and had obviously been in ritual use since one opens with a swastika painted with sandal paste and the other with the *ik omkar* sign.

initial decision of 1430 pages was the result of typographical uniformity in one early twentieth century edition (by Charan Singh Shahid) set in type, the format of which gained public acceptance and later was sanctioned by the SGPC.<sup>397</sup> This interpretation proposes that the standard pagination was not impelled by any numerical symbolism or religious motives, but emerged from the process of typesetting the written subject matter to make up page images. Standardizing the Guru Granth Sahib to 1430 pages, however, had an effect on the religious Sikh life since it was now possible to make page citation and systemize recitations of the whole text after the new pagination.

These three steps – to fix and sanction the content, break up the lines of words, and paginate the whole text – are just a few examples of the religious measures which Sikh institutions have taken in order to create a flawless and authoritative printed version of Guru Granth Sahib with acceptance in the wider community. Print technology brought about the possibility to prescribe the manner of presenting the Gurus teaching in a physical object and made the sacred words accessible to the literate masses irrespective of time and space. Not only custodians of handwritten manuscripts or specialist reciters could access to the Gurus' teaching in written words but all Sikhs with sufficient knowledge in the Gurmukhi script and the means to procure and install printed versions of the scripture in a proper manner could immerse themselves in the teaching. Wherever the Sikhs would settle in the world they shared a scripture with a fixed content and physical form. The adoption of print technology thus contributed to a homogenization of the sacred text in the Sikh community and simultaneously democratized and popularized Sikh worship centered on a printed text.

#### MAKING THE GURU VISIBLE

The printing process marks the birth of any written text. The paper, ink, and cover will make up the physical body of a book and the typographical procedure of imprinting signs on paper in a syntactical order creates and encloses a content that can be read and interpreted. In the case of a sacred text, believed to possess a significant interior, the printing process actualizes even stronger relations between the outer and inner dimensions of the text. When I asked an elderly Sikh man in Varanasi about the moment at which the Sikh scripture is accredited the supreme status of a Guru, he answered: "When Guru Granth Sahib ji is printed in press the book gets the power of Guru Maharaj ji." As this man continued his argument, one should distinguish between the physical form (*rup/sarup*) of the book and the interior Guru of *gurbani* which is embodied in material imprints on the paper pages within the text. The arrangement of the Gurus' words in Gurmukhi script over 1430 pages in one single volume is the process by which the invisible agency of the Guru is made present by being set in visible signs of language. It is the moment when the agentive Guru and the object-book come into play and the physical text assumes the identity and status of Guru Granth Sahib. Already at the final stage in the printing process the Sikh scrip-

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<sup>397</sup> Pashaura Singh 2000: 232 – 233.



ture is thus conceived as a Guru to be furnished with a solemnized handling. Given this, Sikh publishers will display a deep concern for the printing procedures.

As the representative body of the Sikh community, the SGPC is today the main publisher of scriptures which has attempted to control and monopolize the production and distribution.<sup>398</sup> Under leadership of *jatedhar* Ranjit Singh, the highest religious instance at Amritsar – *Akal Takht* – issued an edict (*hukam-nama*) in 1998 which assigned SGPC sole rights to produce Guru Granth Sahib. Printing the scripture by private agencies was to be treated as a blasphemous act and publishers violating the resolution were consequently declared guilty of religious misconducts and requested to undergo a religious punishment (*tankhah*).<sup>399</sup> The strong measures taken by the SGPC do not merely rest on the organization's self-perception as the authoritative representative of the Sikh community. The organization has presented its argument for exclusive publishing rights in strictly religious terms, stating that the Guru should not be exposed to market interests and the printing procedures must protect the sanctity of the scripture by complying with the Sikh *Maryada*, or the code of conduct. The most radical strategy to ensure that publishers will observe the normative rules is to monopolize the production of scriptures. In practice the code of conduct implies that the publisher should manufacture Guru Granth Sahib in accordance with its sanctioned content and form and give due respect to the book during the printing process. Workers at the Golden Offset Press at Amritsar who are not *Amritdhari* Sikhs have to sign a pledge before SGPC that they will remove shoes and cover their heads inside the printing house and abstain from tobacco, alcohol and other intoxicants. Entry to printing press is restricted only to those who comply with these rules. During the printing procedures the workers are expected to chant the sacred formulae of "Satnam Vahiguru" and printing matter is to be treated with greatest care. Printed loose paper sheets should be covered with robes and the bound scriptural corpus wrapped in clothes. Even waste material containing *gurbani* with typographical errors should be reverentially saved to be taken to Goindwal Sahib for cremation (see below). To prevent desecration of Guru Granth Sahib during production, the SGPC set up probation committees in the end of 1990s to supervise the manufacturing of scriptures by private publishers.<sup>400</sup> The inspection reflects a tension between religious attitudes and business interests when it is possible to have the Guru-scripture mass produced.

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<sup>398</sup> The SGPC publishes about 5000 copies of the Guru Granth Sahib yearly. The estimated budget for the *Golden Offset Press* in the year 2004 – 2005 amounted to 40 million rupees. *The Tribune*, 2004-03-16.

<sup>399</sup> The SGPC has recurrently distributed religious punishments to private publishers for misconducts in the production and distribution of scriptures. In 1998, for instance, selling of "waste paper" from the printing process that carried *gurbani* inscriptions was the count and reason for excommunicating one publisher. *The Tribune*, 2001-05-16, 2006-04-23. What has been put at stake in this and similar controversies are not necessarily typographical matters but religious conducts to maintain proper respect to a scripture.

<sup>400</sup> *The Tribune*, 2001-05-16.

To pay respect to sacred words, provision for selling manuscripts has been condemned in the Sikh tradition and printed versions should likewise not be merchandized to make a profit. According to a strong religious sentiment among the Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib cannot be sold nor purchased like ordinary consumer items, but only the product costs are to be reciprocated through voluntary donations to the publisher or the gurdwara responsible for the conveyance of texts. "We cannot buy Baba ji, but instead we offer money for the volume as much as we can afford", a middle-aged woman in Varanasi said. The moral ethos which is valid for relations in the human society – people cannot not be sold nor bought unless being degraded of their human values – should likewise apply to contexts in which the Sikh scripture pursue custodians. Giving money to a publishing Sikh institution in the form of a devotional gift is, on the other hand, an act of *seva* with potential to purify the currency and bestow merits to the donor.

That Guru Granth Sahib is not an ordinary book to purchase from the bookstore is evident from distribution policies maintained by publishers in Amritsar. A bookseller will be reluctant and may even refuse to hand over a copy to a person suspect of not being able to satisfy the ritual requirements that serves to warrant the scripture's status. Unlike *sanchis*, the text divided into several volumes, the scripture in a single volume requires formal installation and daily ministration. Prospective procurers will likewise not consider acquiring the scripture in one volume unless they have the capacity to observe these regulations. As long as the text remains in guardianship of publishers it will be given due respect, and the transition from the world of printers to new custodians in exclusively religious settings will be marked by formalized practices.

The private publisher *Bhai Chattar Singh Jivan Singh* has appointed the interior of the book store in the bazaar streets nearby Harimandir Sahib with great consideration of devout customers and the sacred products in store. In an outer room secular books on different subjects are packed together in bookshelves, while prayer books (*gutkas*), the Sikh scripture in two or more volumes (*sanchi*), whisks, robes and other ritual commodities are preserved in cupboards in an inner showroom behind glazed windows and doors. Visiting customers are expected to remove shoes and cover the head when they enter the bookstore and take a seat on the floor covered with white mattresses. The shop also provides a small washbasin for the customary ablution



A demonstration of the Sikh scripture at a private publishing house

prior to the physical touching of books containing *gurbani*. When customers arrive for the purpose of acquiring Guru Granth Sahib the employees will take out the scriptural volume, wrapped in white robes, and place the text on a string bed (*manji*) or a temporary dais in the showroom. The procurer will be given a fairly technical demonstration of print, typeface, format, binding and other typographical details. When the customers arrived at a decision on which folio to obtain, all present in the shop will rise to a standing position and read the Sikh supplication. Afterwards, one person will carry the new robed scripture on the head in a small procession to a car or van and carefully place it either on a decorated palanquin, a separate seat in the car, or in the lap of one person, before driving away. With exception for the driver, all passengers in the vehicle are expected to sit barefoot.

The attitudes and measures that Sikhs take in the production of Guru Granth Sahib mirror external strategies by which the Sikhs attempt to surmount the difference between a mere “book” and a text which embodies the agency of a Guru. Although Guru Granth Sahib takes birth by the same typographical procedures as other books, the formalized action during the printing process and the strict control exerted over the production and distribution effectively creates sacredness of the text. That SGPC and other Sikh institutions have attempted to gain control over the processes by which the Guru Granth Sahib assumes a material form seem to suggest that sanctification of the text is invoked already by the printing process. By placing the words and teaching of the Gurus on a set number of pages, the eternal Word-Guru embodies in the form of a written book to be revealed to humanity within given temporal and spatial frameworks. *Gurbani* made visible in print has transformed typographical matters into sacred items to be venerated and guarded, and the whole scripture in one volume will be treated as a Guru imputed personhood. From an analytical perspective the solemn handling of Guru Granth Sahib can be viewed as parts of larger strategies by which Sikhs effectively create presence and authority of a majestic Guru which/who assumes a manifest bodily form to act in the world. These strategies will assume even more elaborated forms when the scripture is to be transported and travel longer distances.

#### PROCESSIONAL TRANSPORTATIONS

Any movement of Guru Granth Sahib within and outside the gurdwara involves a set of rules to observe. Whilst the scripture is moved on shorter travels it is conventional to either mount it on a bedecked palanquin (*palki*) carried on the shoulders of a group of devotees or let one attendant alone carry the text on a robe on top of his head. To legitimate these customs Sikhs will relate the *Gurbilas* account on Guru Arjan’s solemnized transportation of manuscripts (*Goindwal pothis*) to Amritsar and the first installation of the compiled scripture in 1604.

Today the usage of palanquin is more restricted to major Sikh centers and festive occasions, while carrying the text on the head has become the customary practice

in the everyday liturgies.<sup>401</sup> In line with body symbolism in South Asia and elsewhere, a text which enshrines a religious teaching should be offered the most highest and noble position of the human body to mark out its supernatural origin. In Sikhism this means of veneration evokes strong associations to soteriological metaphors. Considering that divine words emanated downwards, from a supreme being to the Gurus, the placement of the scripture may be interpreted as symbolically representing a continued divine revelation to humans. The cosmological schemes and symbolism in the Gurus' hymns often locates "the tenth gate" (*dasam duar*), or the door to liberation, to the uppermost part of the human skull. This "gate" is a portal for the Guru's words and teaching which illuminates the path towards salvation. To place the Guru Granth Sahib on top of the human crown is to symbolically represent a perpetual revelation and downward canalization of *gurbani* to the human gate of liberation.<sup>402</sup>

In harmony with the culturally defined divisions between lower and higher parts of the human body and modes of paying respect by either revealing or concealing body parts, the carrier should keep his head covered and, if practicable, walk barefoot to pay respect to the sacred text. To put the majestic grandeur of Guru Granth Sahib on public display one attendant will walk ahead making a royal way for the scripture by showering water or flower petals on the ground, while another person following behind will sway a whisk over the folio.

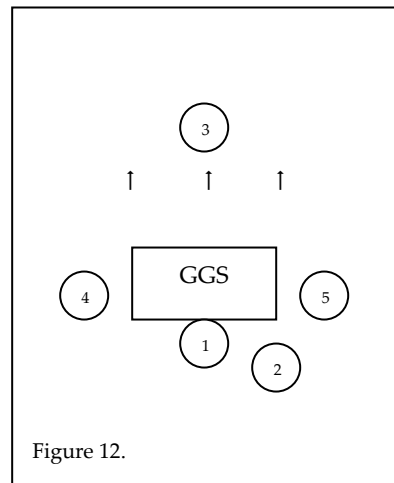
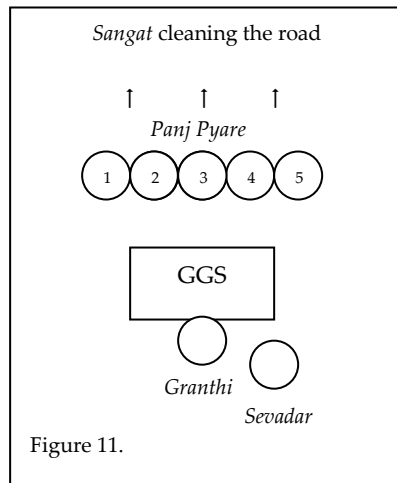
At all times when the scripture is traveling longer distances it is customary to have a team of five people accompanying the text. The number five has several symbolic connotations in the Sikh religion and society, and is firmly embedded in the doctrine of *Guru panth*, the idea of the Guru's mystical presence among five or more Sikhs who gather for devotional activities.<sup>403</sup> Similar to the secular traditional system of *panchayat*, a group of five senior men constituting a council of a village or town, the assembly of five pious Sikhs has authority to take decisions for the Sikh congregation. In the particular context of transporting the Guru Granth Sahib the number five stands for the *panj pyare*, or the five pious men, who dress up in traditional uniforms and arm themselves to symbolically represent the first Sikhs who were initiated into the Khalsa in 1699. The *panj pyare* should always walk near the scripture, courageously hold upright swords to display readiness to fight for justice and repeatedly chant the standardized formulae for the divine name (*Satnam Vahiguru*) in chorus. The recitation is viewed as an enactment of *simran*, mediation and remembrance of God through verbal repetition of the divine name, which has power to charge ordinary acts with spiritual properties.

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<sup>401</sup> Carrying a religious text on the head is neither a modern phenomena nor typical for Sikhism, but occurs in practices of several other religious traditions. Gombrich (1971), for instance, has described how Buddhist monks carry sacred books on their head in procession when they go to chant Pali texts for protective purposes (*Priti* ceremony).

<sup>402</sup> If the Gurus' composition would have located the gate of human liberation to the heart, for instance, one can presume that Sikhs would consider it more respectful to embrace the text in their arms.

<sup>403</sup> See Pashaura Singh's (1999) analysis of the number five in Sikhism.



The way in which the five men position themselves in relation to the Guru Granth Sahib depends upon the nature of the event. On occasions which attract a large number of devotees, such as parades on festival days, they are expected to walk ahead of the scripture as the Guru's armed guard (See Figure 11), while the ordinary attendants of the gurdwara are responsible for the scriptural carriage. In case the five men alone are responsible for the transportation they divide their duties among themselves: in the centre one man will carry the scripture, while another purifies the road with water and a third man waves a whisk over the text. The two remaining members of the group will walk on the left and the right side of the text to watch the cortege (See Figure 12). In either case the *panj pyare* represents an elite unit of saint-soldiers who are responsible for escorting and protecting the sovereign Guru.

Whenever the Guru Granth Sahib is to be moved from one location to another, devotees will read the standardized *Ardas* text before and after the journey. To Sikhs the prayer is a communicative instrument for asking the Guru permission to carry out acts in the future and confirm action already completed, and hence works as a speech act to frame and sanctify all religious action. In addition to the standardized prayer, the reciter will insert a few sentences in which he verbalizes information about the destination, the conditions of the travel, and at the end expresses regrets if the travel is inconvenient to the Guru and servants have made unintentional mistakes. The Guru must accordingly be informed and apologized to for the travel procedures whenever the scriptural corpus is moved.

The above-mentioned means of conveyance have been actualized in the Sikh community for centuries. In response to transportation developments in the twentieth century and a growing demand for printed editions, Sikh authorities have re-

invented customs for a ceremonial conveyance to safeguard an honorable handling of the Guru. Publishers at Amritsar do not hesitate to convey scriptures to congregations at distant locations by car, bus, train, or plane, but will display a deep concern for the ways by which this is done. The SGPC has, for instance, decided that it is disrespectful, and a gross violation of the normative code of conduct, to mail the Guru Granth Sahib with postal services or ship the text with freight trains as ordinary goods. Instead the book should go by passenger traffic under guard of a group of five and be offered a separate seat, preferable on upper compartments. To follow these regulations people will buy an additional flight or train ticket for the scripture and in some instances charter a separate train or airliner for the occasion.<sup>404</sup> Passengers traveling by a private car or van will either place the text on a palanquin or carry it on the lap of an attending guardian, who will recite the godly name and be careful to not fall asleep, cough, or let his body touch the scriptural corpus. To meet the new situation the SGPC and other Sikh organizations have constructed specially-made buses and vans to provide communities all over northern India with new scriptures under proper conditions and at the same time collect used and damaged printed volumes which will be taken to Goindwal Sahib for cremation in a funeral rite. The vans may carry hundreds of printed volumes, each of which is given a separate seat and is covered with robes and flowers.

When a large number of scriptures are conveyed to distant locations local congregations are likely to organize an apparatus of lavish processions and may even convert public means of transportation to a ritualized cortege. Situated between the two Sikh pilgrimage centers of Patna Sahib and Amritsar, the local community at Varanasi utilizes the transportation system organized between the cities and is informed whenever trains or buses conveying scriptures will pass by. When devotees at Patna Sahib, for instance, sent a large number of damaged scriptures to Goindwal Sahib for cremation in 1991 they booked in advance two separate train coaches of the Indian railways which were cleaned and embellished with flowers. At that time a *sevadar* now stationed in Varanasi was one of twenty-one young men selected to answer for the transportation services. As he recalled, the congregation constructed small palanquins in the coaches by placing wooden sticks on the seats and covering them with new mattresses and sheet. Above the seats they put up canopies attached to the ceiling. The public moving of Guru Granth Sahib from the main shrine (Harimandir Sahib) at Patna Sahib to the local railway stations was divided into different sequences. Firstly, devotees walked barefoot carrying scriptures on their heads and placed them on palanquins mounted on trucks. In a long parade the trucks solemnly advanced through the streets sprinkled with water and petals. The Sikh congregation had requested inhabitants to temporarily refrain from smoking cigarettes and *bidis* in

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<sup>404</sup> In 2004 the conveyance of Sikh scriptures from Amritsar to Canada made its way on to the BBC news. On the request of Sikhs in Canada the SGPC sent 150 scriptures on a chartered airliner. All the scriptures were carried on foot in a procession from SGPC's printing house to the Rajasansi airport in Amritsar – a more than four kilometre long route – and lodged on separate seats in the aircraft (*BBC News* 2004-04-03).

order to keep the route pure in honor of the Guru. At the railway station people carried the scriptures on their heads into the compartments and placed ten to fifteen volumes on each seat. As the train was to leave at 4.30 the next morning, people performed devotional music (*kirtan*) at the railway station throughout the night. During the eighteen-hour long train journey to Punjab the selected group of pious devotees took turns in guarding the volumes and singing devotional hymns. At each station the train halted, the doors of the coaches were opened to let local Sikhs pay homage and hand over additional old volumes. At Varanasi the gurdwara committee had arranged a bus to bring 75 scriptures from the gurdwara to the railway station in a parade with devotional music and brass bands. Temporarily, devotees engendered a sacred space and converted an ordinary train journey between Bihar and Punjab to a solemnized funeral procession of Guru Granth Sahib. When the train reached Amritsar the next morning, the SGPC sent buses and trucks to the railway stations to continue the procession to Goindwal Sahib.

As other interlocutors in Varanasi informed, special buses are regularly coming from Sikh communities in Amritsar, Delhi, Jabbalpur (Madhya Pradesh) and other locations which are responsible for transportations of new and old scriptures in different parts of northern India. A central function of these conveyances is to replace old and damaged editions of the Guru Granth Sahib that will be consigned for ritual disposal with new printed volumes. The collection and distribution of new and old texts either by bus or train have become an institutionalized system of regenerating the body-form of Guru Granth Sahib in local communities. These services are considered to be a kind of *sewa*, selfless and merit-bestowing deeds to the Guru and Sikh congregations, and should therefore be free of charge, even though it is customary to offer monetary donations of three and four figured numbers.<sup>405</sup>

The different modes of transporting Guru Granth Sahib can be viewed as strategies by which Sikhs personify and attribute the scripture agency of a Guru; they display the text as a “person” of superior status which requires honorable ministration. Whenever Guru Granth Sahib is taken out for transportations the text will be surrounded by pious devotees who in acts of veneration make it a “social other” invested agency of a personal Guru.

### INVITING THE GURU HOME

The Guru Granth Sahib leads a transitional life, in the sense that the scripture is made for a purpose and intended for a reception that is active. In case a family has enough space at their house they are likely to install the Guru Granth Sahib in a room solely dedicated for the text. Eleven of the informants who participated in my semi-structured interviews had created domestic gurdwaras which they had furnished according to stipulated norms and individual liking. Whereas some would keep a

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<sup>405</sup> In Varanasi the normal amount of a donation for a new scripture was between 400 and 500 rupees, even if people give considerably more if they have the financial means to do so.

more Spartan decoration in the Guru's room, others had constructed embellished worship places with framed posters of the Sikh Gurus and Harimandir Sahib, brass statues of religious insignia, flower bouquets, oil-lamps, incense holders, and other religious paraphernalia. Some spaces would shelter portraits of ancestors and icons of deities or saints who by tradition served as protectors of the family. To provide the text a resting place (*sukhasan*) for the night the families had either built a separate bed in the same room or placed the scripture on a palanquin at night.

Religious Sikhs often perceive the construction of a domestic gurdwara as if they are inviting an honorable guest, who will be involved in the socio-religious life of the family. In a large Punjabi family, for instance, the members had constructed a commodious gurdwara on the upper floor and said they were "following the Sikh code of conduct in the house", even though none of the family members were *Amritdhari* Sikhs at the time of our conversations. The woman of the house, responsible for household duties, had adjusted all family meals to food offerings presented to Guru Granth Sahib. At 10 in the morning she would give the scripture milk and two hours later offer the text a family lunch from the domestic kitchen. Before the *Sukhasan* ceremony at 7.30 pm she presented the text with dinner and at night kept a glass of water beside the scriptural bed "because just like we get thirsty in the night similarly Baba ji might get thirsty", she said. How these meals were offered to Guru Granth Sahib she explained in plain words:

First of all we take out the food for Baba ji [Guru Granth Sahib]. We have special pots and plates for the food of Baba ji. After taking out food I go upstairs [to the gurdwara] and place the food in front of Baba ji. Then I perform an *Ardas*. In that [*Ardas*] I take the name of ten Gurus and ask Baba ji to accept our food. I offer food by touching the vegetables and chapattis with a dagger (*kirpan*).

By conducting *bhog lagana* (See previous section this chapter) all food prepared in the family kitchen was shared and sanctified by the Guru before consumption. The individuals I interviewed were of the undisputed opinion that a symbolic portion of all meals prepared at houses which host Guru Granth Sahib must first be presented to the Guru before family members and other guests can eat.

Rigorously these families would perform the daily Sikh liturgies according to the Sikh code of conduct, but personalized and adjusted the ceremonies to the needs and routines of their family. The majority did *Prakash* of Guru Granth Sahib before sunrise and *Sukhasan* after sunset, and some would bring forward or delay the services with a few hours owing to their own working and sleeping habits. The duty to carry out the daily ministration of Guru Granth Sahib was distributed differently between the family members, although in most cases the women of the house were responsible for the ritual enactment. In three of the eleven domestic gurdwaras I visited the mother of the house was alone in charge of both the morning and evening ceremonies, even if the women emphasized the desire to have the whole family gath-



ered. In equally many homes the younger women – the daughters-in-law or sisters-in-law – shared the duties. A couple of families had created routines of distributing the daily services between man and wife: while the husband carried out *Prakash* in the morning before going to work, the woman performed *Sukhasan* at night. In another family the married couple was too busy in their professional life and had therefore hired a private reciter (*pathi*) to answer for all services. Only in one domestic gurdwara did the father of the house, an elderly retired businessman, take care of the ceremonies alone. In all these cases it was always the women who conducted the daily food offerings of family meals (*bhog lagana*) to Guru Granth Sahib. The only occasion at which women fully entrusted all procedures to their sons or husbands was during their menstruation.<sup>406</sup> The gender distribution, here briefly sketched, may be suggestive of the important ritual role women play within the domain of a household. In conformity with the traditional gender division in a patriarchal society men are granted active roles in public spheres, while the women's spaces for acquisition of respect and power are more restricted to domestic domains. Similar to male performers and specialists of public gurdwaras, women function as domestic *granthis*, who possess liturgical and linguistic knowledge to function like "ministers" in homely courts of the Guru-scripture. At the same time the data indicates that families and the women themselves hand over the religious duties at the house to paid specialists when they acquire active roles in the public domain.

In this context it is motivated to observe the reasons people might have for *not* establishing a domestic gurdwara. In the semi-structured interviews this made up one of several attendance questions posed to the majority of respondents who replied in the negative to possession of Guru Granth Sahib. Just as modes of procedure for acquiring scriptures can elucidate attitudes people have to the guardianship of Guru Granth Sahib, alleged grounds for disclaims may reveal religious stances in even more plain words. To exemplify these local views I will quote seven informants who countered the question "What is your reason for not having Guru Granth Sahib ji at the house?":

1. *Young female student*

I am living in a rented house. People are coming and going. Guru Granth Sahib ji should be kept with respect and not like ordinary books. But when I will get my own house I will keep a place for Guru Granth Sahib ji.

2. *Young female student*

Guru Granth Sahib ji is pure and the place must also be pure. We have a very small house. If you have Guru Granth Sahib ji you need a special place and you have to do *Prakash* daily. I do not want to give disrespect to Guru ji.

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<sup>406</sup> See more about attitudes related to menstruation in Chapter 3.

3. *Young businessman*

It is a problem with space and money. If I will make a lot of money then I will buy a big place and keep two *Darbar Sahib*. I want to do a lot for Guru Maharaj ji. I feel from inside how much I am capable of doing. I want to do great service (*seva*) to please Guru ji.

4. *Middle-aged businesswoman*

We had a gurdwara in our home...but twice I forgot to do *Sukhasan* of Guru Granth Sahib ji. That is considered very bad. From that time I thought that I am not fit for it [service to the scripture]. When we parted with the old house, our new home was too small [for keeping a gurdwara].

5. *Middle-aged businessman*

It requires much *seva*. We cannot perform this *seva* and we do not want to commit sins. You need a special room for Guru Granth Sahib ji which is quiet. It should be sacred and pure. We do not have that here. You have to do *seva*. ...My friend, he has Guru Granth Sahib ji at his house and the family do *seva* in the morning and the evening, and also offer food. If you have Guru Granth Sahib ji at home you must first offer your food to Guru ji. Only then you can take your meal.

6. *Middle-aged housewife*

Before we were agriculturalists. If you have Guru Granth Sahib ji at your house you have to protect it and keep the place pure. You have to take care of God very much.

7. *Middle-aged businessman*

Lack of space. I do not own my house. You should keep Guru Granth Sahib ji in your own house. A rented house is disrespectful [to Guru Granth Sahib].

As illustrated by the epithets used in some of these responses the scripture is referred to as a personal Guru (2, 5), a great emperor (3) and even likened to the divine (6). Denominative markers like these serve to address the scripture in a respectful manner. The conversational contexts disclose that when people imagine Guru Granth Sahib being invited to their house they attribute the scripture identifications of an honored guest, who demands devout ministration. Judged from the frequency with which these respondents (and others) referred to the lack of proper housing, the most central feature of attitudes related to custodianship of a scripture involves spatial considerations. To provide Guru Granth Sahib proper respect the scripture is to be offered a separate room at the house which is kept pure and peaceful. Rented prem-

ises do not satisfy these requirements, since tenants cannot protect domestic spaces properly nor afford the scripture proprietorship of a room in the full. The second most central feature is the obligatory ministration of Guru Granth Sahib, colloquially referred to as *seva* to the scripture. In practice, this implies the daily order to carry out the *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* ceremonies and offer a symbolic portion of all meals prepared in the household to the Guru-scripture for blessings. Without doubt local Sikhs take the obligation of service in all seriousness. As exemplified above, one informant (answer 4) confessed that she forgot to carry out the *Sukhasan* ceremony on two occasions and on that account decided to not establish a gurdwara when she moved to a new house. A negligence of *seva* is considered as blasphemous acts that will incur sins, while a regular devotional tending pleases the Guru and will bestow merits to the individual and the family. A prospective ministrant of Guru Granth Sahib does not have to be an *Amritdhari* Sikh and follow the Khalsa discipline in the personal life, but he or she is expected to keep the Sikh code of conduct within the spaces of the house. As this rule is pragmatically interpreted, the family should uphold a certain degree of spatial purity by keeping the house clean and not bring tobacco, alcohol or other intoxicants into the house. Altogether the attitudes of local Sikhs mirror that when the Guru Granth Sahib arrives at a private house people believe the text is already invested with agency of a Guru.

Far away from the Sikh centre of Amritsar, devotees in Varanasi may procure volumes of Guru Granth Sahib by different means. The eleven interviewees who hosted Guru Granth Sahib at their houses had inherited folios from their parents and acquired new ones either directly from Amritsar or through the local gurdwara. With great affection families kept old texts as heirlooms to remember their ancestral origin. A Sindhi family, for instance, safeguarded a translation of the scripture into Sindhi language, which their parents brought along when they migrated from Pakistan in 1947. For the children brought up in Varanasi, the text functioned as a memento and representation of their ethnic belonging. To honor a scripture of historical value the family may construct a gurdwara and publicly display the text during festivals or other solemnized occasion. Nearby the village Ahraura outside of Varanasi a Sikh family occasionally receive pilgrims to gaze upon a mini-sized scripture that was printed for Sikh soldiers who served for the British in the First World War. For some reason the grandfather of the house had the text given to him by a Nirmala sant in the city of Mirzapur. The scripture was only 1.4 square inches (3.5 cm) with microscopic typeface in Gurmukhi script and carefully packed in an original rounded copper tin containing small robes and a magnifying glass to tuck in the turban after readings in the field. The lid was decorated with an impression portraying a contemplating Nanak in yogic posture, holding a sable in the left hand and rolling a rosary with the right. The family preserved the miniature Guru Granth Sahib as a precious historical object to commemorate the heroic deeds of Sikh soldiers and kept their private house open to visitors seeking *darshan* of the text.

But far from all appreciate the custody of historical texts and will lay greater store by the custom of keeping the Guru at home for worship and ministration. When an elderly Sikh man in Varanasi said “We are having Guru Granth Sahib ji from generations”, he referred to the family tradition of providing the scripture custody at the house. The man had inherited an old handwritten copy of Guru Granth Sahib from his own father, but handed over the folio to the gurdwara for proper disposal. People will instead use a printed edition of Guru Granth Sahib for the daily readings and when the pages are getting old exchange it with a new. The majority of my interlocutors had obtained new editions from the Gurubagh Gurdwara, which regularly supplies texts from Amritsar and sometimes arranges for the ceremonial transportation to the house. Others ordered the scripture directly from the SPGC, private publishers



A miniature scripture from the First World War

at Amritsar, or via friends and relatives in the Punjab, who by conventional means would convey the text to Varanasi. A Sikh man told of a train journey he and his wife made to Amritsar only for obtaining a scripture. On the way back home he booked three seats for himself, his wife, and the Guru Granth Sahib.

When a new text is received in a family they might pay a visit to the public gurdwara to do *matha tekna* and present offerings,

and then return home to formally induct the Guru at the house. This installation usually goes by the same name as the daily morning ceremony – *Prakash* – and celebrates the moment when the Guru enters a new space to be activated and incorporated in the social sphere of a community.<sup>407</sup> At the new abode the text will be offered an honorable seat and then ceremonially opened in line with the routine of the morning liturgy, including the taking and reading of the *Hukam* and distribution of consecrated food (*karah prashad*). Characteristic of this event is the custom of reading either the whole or the first five stanzas of the composition *Japji Sahib*, the opening hymn of Guru Granth Sahib. In this context the recitation does not merely aim to render the content of the hymn, but generates an illocutionary force from its placement within the particular setting: the recitation creates the symbolic stage of the scripture’s entrance and incorporation into a new social sphere. The scripture is no longer a text to be used by any assembly of devotees but will be subject to ministration and devotion within the social spaces and activities of a particular community. The recitation of *Japji Sahib* thus evokes the framework of a formal inauguration of the scripture and

<sup>407</sup> Another indigenous term used for the ceremony is *sathapna*, or “installation”.

establishes new bonds between the Guru and disciples at a special location. In the customary supplication that will follow, the new guardians of the text will ask pardon for tribulations they have caused and formally welcome the Guru to their house or community of disciples. Like an honored guest invited for a longer stay at the house, the text will be ceremonially greeted when it is installed.

### THE LAST CEREMONY

Even if community members treat the Guru Granth Sahib with respectful care in the daily worship, protect the scripture from dust and dirt, turn over the pages with the utmost care, and wrap it in both underclothing and robes suitable for the season, still the scriptural body will get old and damaged. A printed scripture will generally stay in the gurdwara for forty to fifty years if long-lived. After this, when the scriptural body loses its vigor, the pages are getting folded or the bindings become loose or even broken, the scripture is considered “aged” (*biradh* [Punjabi] or *vraddh*, [Hindi]), and should consequently be exchanged for a new volume. In a solemnized manner the worn out Guru-scripture will be transported to the town of Goindwal Sahib beside the river Beas in Punjab to be cremated in a ceremony termed *Agan Bhet samskar*, or “the rite of the fire sacrifice”. Just like the human body made of the five elements is consigned to fire after death, the scripture should similarly be burnt down to ashes after completing a worldly existence. An oft-stated reason legitimizing this highly ritualized treatment of old Guru Granth Sahib is the fear of letting the Gurus’ printed words get into the wrong hands and be exposed to negligence. A *granthi* in Varanasi imagined the most dreadful scenario of having tobacco rolled in its sheet:

When the Guru Granth Sahib ji is getting old it is very important to do *samskar*. If we do not do that it is a type of insult to the Guru’s *bani* in it, so it is better to cremate it. Like anyone can take it from here, the shopkeepers can take it and tear pages from it and sell tobacco in it. That would be a huge insult to Guru Granth Sahib ji.

In the year of 1999 the two main gurdwaras in Varanasi were in possession of eleven Guru Granth Sahib, each of which were used for daily worship and recitations. At the same time Gurubagh Gurdwara stored about 40 *biradh* scriptures, which had completed a life-work and were respectfully kept in cupboards under robes. The gurdwara committee in Varanasi had offered the service to take these old scriptures into safe custody while they waited for transportation to Goindwal for the last cremation ritual.

Mass-production of printed versions of the Guru Granth Sahib in the later part of twentieth century confronted the Sikh community with a new urgent issue of disposal: what do to with the large quantities of printed scriptures that are no longer in use? How should old and damaged scriptures be taken care of? What should the

publishers do with waste material from the printing press and misprinted texts? To simply waste the sacred pages or the whole scripture like secular books is considered an extremely blasphemous act to the Guru. The Sikh response to the modern challenges has generated the re-invention of a cremation ceremony of the Guru Granth Sahib which both ensures a respectful disposal and guarantees that old printed versions will not fall into the wrong hands. As the final sections of this chapter will illustrate, the organization and design of the cremation ceremony is a self-conscious enterprise. In face of modernization it attempts to unite Sikhs worldwide and aid the attribution of personhood to the Guru Granth Sahib by bringing recognizable elements in Sikh worship together in a new ceremony.

#### PREVIOUS CUSTOMS OF DISPOSAL

Although solemnized disposal of scriptures existed in the preceding manuscript culture, either by immersing the manuscripts in some watercourse or obliterating them in fire, the preferable method during the twentieth century seems to have been cremation. To all appearances the pilgrimage site at Goindwal Sahib beside the river Beas – a Sikh centre which developed under Guru Amardas' regime in the seventeenth century – preserved a tradition of burning old Sikh texts. After the partition in 1947 the SGPC entrusted the centre formal responsibility to cremate damaged scriptures.<sup>408</sup> At congregations outside the Punjab the disposal of damaged versions of the Guru Granth Sahib was for a long time a local affair. During my fieldwork I was told of a group of pious Sikhs at Paonta Sahib who conducted cremations of scriptures at the bank of river Yamuna. The individuals performing the ceremonies were required to do a *chilla*, or a forty-day period of isolation and meditation to gain spiritual purity and power before the cremations. According to my knowledge these local customs have not been documented by ethnographers and will to all probability become less common as Sikh organizations strive to control and standardize practices.

My informants in Varanasi related two instances in 1972 and 1982 when old scriptures were ceremonially burnt at Gurubagh Gurdwara. Sikh and Sindhi emigrants from West Pakistan had brought with them a large number of printed texts which had become old and damaged. One *granthi* remembered the course of the latter event: in the garden of Gurubagh Gurdwara the book cover and all 1430 pages of each scripture were soaked with clarified butter (*ghi*) for purification. To prevent the ashes from being scattered, the attendants placed the scriptures in huge pots and read the *Ardas* before the texts were set on fire. When the texts had burnt people collected

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<sup>408</sup> In connection with the partition in 1947 both individual Sikhs and the military brought a considerable number of editions from the Pakistani side to the new India. Some of the older manuscripts of the scripture were repaired with new covers and binding to be kept at private and public Sikh libraries, while other volumes were burnt at Goindwal Sahib (Information provided by Man Singh Nirankari, Chandigarh, July 2004). During my own visits at Goindwal Sahib local inhabitants claimed that the local congregation had burnt damaged Sikh scriptures over an open fire since at least the beginning of the twentieth century.

the ashes in large bedecked urns and again performed a supplication for the completed cremation. The gurdwara committee arranged a city procession from the gurdwara to the main ghat (Dashashwamedh), where a team of devotees took out the urns to the middle of river Ganga and immersed the ashes in the water. These practices were discontinued in the 1990s when the congregation acquired information about organized scriptural cremations at Goindwal Sahib. As the *granthi* reasoned, contemporary people prefer to remise the responsibility to the convenient service of specialists in the Punjab because they know how to secure the dignity of Guru Granth Sahib. "They have institutions and resources to transport and cremate old Guru Granth Sahib ji with full respect," he said. The new organization of death ceremonies for scriptures which have completed a life-time has become widely popularized among lay Sikhs. Of the eleven interlocutors who accommodated Guru Granth Sahib at their houses in Varanasi, all intended to hand over old volumes to the local gurdwara or directly to the centre at Goindwal Sahib. Thus, the local gurdwara is no longer responsible for the disposal of old scriptures, but act more like an intermediary institution which preserves old texts before they are sent back to the Punjab to be reverentially cremated in a ceremony controlled by specialists.<sup>409</sup> It is to this ceremony we must turn.

#### RE-INVENTING A DEATH CEREMONY

In the year of 1988 Narinder Singh, a Sikh businessman in Ludhiana (Punjab), founded a religious centre called *Prabhu Simran Kender*, literally "the centre for meditation and remembrance of God".<sup>410</sup> The main purpose of the centre was to collect and cremate damaged versions of Guru Granth Sahib and prayer books containing *gurbani* under proper procedures. In a speech published on DVD by his association, Narinder Singh asserts that the idea sprung forth during his visits at Goindwal Sahib:

Naturally I was going from Ludhiana to Goindwal Sahib. At that time the *seva* of giving Guru Granth Sahib ji, *gutke* [prayer books] and *pothian* [scriptures] to the fire continued there. I saw this *seva*. I just got an idea that this work should be done in a more honourable and respectful way. With this idea I came back to gurdwara *Prabhu Simran Kender*, where I was responsible.<sup>411</sup>

At the centre in Ludhiana, Narinder Singh built up a specially constructed cremation chamber with iron beds which he called *Angitha Sahib*, "the respected pyre". To provide old texts an honorable rest before cremation he also built up a hall, furnished with a great number of four-poster beds, which would function as a hospice for scrip-

<sup>409</sup> The old texts, waiting for cremation, are kept in a metal cupboard inside the scriptural bedroom (*sukhasan*).

<sup>410</sup> Since 2007 *Prabhu Simran Kender* publishes its own web site at: <http://prabhusimran.com>.

<sup>411</sup> *Agan Bhet Seva: Documentary Film*.

tures. Bringing together conventional Sikh symbols and ritual acts, he created a new cremation ceremony that went under the name *Agan Bhet samskar*, meaning “the ritual of fire sacrifice”. In 1988 he started to collect and burn old scriptures, and invited people to participate in the voluntary work termed *Agan Bhet Seva*, “the selfless service for the fire sacrifice”. Subsequently Narinder Singh and the growing congregation at *Prabhu Simran Kender* constructed buses suited for a respectful conveyance of Guru Granth Sahib and began to collect old texts at different locations. The goal in view, however, seemed to have been a gradual coordination and renewal of the scriptural handling at Goindwal Sahib.



Inside *Angitha Sahib* Narinder Singh performs the last rite for scriptures and prayer books.

As the association presents the past, establishing a cremation centre at Goindwal was imperative for many reasons. The town, with an arm of the river Beas flowing alongside, was a historical place already associated with a tradition of burning religious texts. The motive for establishing a cremation ceremony at Goindwal Sahib rested on disapproval of previous burning practices under the control of the SGPC.<sup>412</sup> In the early 1990s Narinder Singh requested the SGPC to take charge of scriptural cremations at Goindwal

Sahib and after due negotiations were committed to this responsibility in 1997.<sup>413</sup> The same year Narinder Singh and voluntary workers constructed two cremation chambers (*Agnitha Sahib*) below the main shrine at Goindwal Sahib and two years later established *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Bhawan* – a gurdwara with a repository hall for scriptures with more than hundred beds.<sup>414</sup>

In cooperation with the SGPC and local gurdwaras Narinder Singh and voluntary workers of his organization begun to collect old scriptures from all over India. To organize the ritual enterprise at two geographically distant locations, the congrega-

<sup>412</sup> Narinder Singh was not diffident about leveling criticism to the practices at Goindwal in public discourses. In September 2000, for instance, he told press reporters from the Punjabi newspaper *Ajit* that the previous practices of tearing and folding pages from scriptures and throwing them into the flames was only to stoke up the fire (*jhulka*). The ashes were spreading everywhere. All things considered, the practices under management of SGPC were not giving proper respect to Guru Granth Sahib (*Ajit*, 2000-09-18).

<sup>413</sup> According to the association’s own history recorded on DVD the head (*mukht*) *granthi* of *Akal Takht* in Amritsar, Giani Bhagwan Singh, was informed of the crematorium at *Prabhu Simran Kender* in Ludhiana in 1994 and the SGPC commissioned him to investigate the institution. The head *granthi* was sympathetic to the activities and consequently the SGPC passed his report.

<sup>414</sup> The estimated building costs amounted to fifteen million rupees in total (*Ajit*, 2000-09-18).



tion conducted the cremation ceremony on the first and the third Sunday of each month in Ludhiana, and the second and the fourth at Goindwal Sahib. The time was not haphazardly chosen. To ensure that the fire had properly consumed all the pages and the ashes had cooled off in a natural way, thirteen days were to pass before the door to the crematoria was opened. In the meantime the congregation would arrange an open reading of the whole Guru Granth Sahib (*Khulla path*) in the adjacent gurdwara and adjust the auspicious ending to the thirteenth day following a cremation. The voluntary workers therefore commuted between Ludhiana and Goindwal Sahib every second weekend, and in the morning of the thirteenth day collected ashes to be immersed in water and perform another fire sacrifice on the same spot the day after. According to internal statistics from year 2000 about 150 scriptures were cremated each month at the centre in Ludhiana and 800 scriptures at Goindwal Sahib.<sup>415</sup>

But far from all texts sent to the centers have been consigned to the fire. When the books arrive a team of five *Amritdhari* Sikhs will check the pages twice and, in case the texts are flawless, they will be exchanged with new cover and donated to some gurdwara or Sikh organization. To burn unblemished scriptures is considered a sacrilegious act, comparable to the cremation of a human who has not yet completed a life-time. The routine inspection also aims at preserving handwritten manuscripts of historical value that will be forwarded to the reference library at Amritsar.

In more recent years the association under leadership of Narinder Singh has expanded its activities to other areas in northern India. By 2004 *Gurdwara Majnu da Talla*, near river Yamuna in the outskirts of Delhi, had built a crematorium and regularly organized the fire ritual.<sup>416</sup> In the years to follow the organization established two additional cremation centers in the village Nathwan (Tohana) in Haryana and the village Ramgarh Bhullar (Jagraon) in the Punjab. At the time of this writing the association is totally in charge of five places for the *Agan Bhet Seva*, four of which provide special gurdwaras for the preservation of texts. To meet the increasing popularity, scriptural cremations are usually arranged in *Gurdwara Majnu da Talla* in Delhi on the first Sunday of each month, at *Prabhu Simran Kender* in Ludhiana and Goindwal Sahib on the second Sunday, and at Ramgarh Bhullar and Nathwan on the third Sunday. Since Goindwal Sahib has become a focal point for public display, the fire ritual is organized there also on the fourth Sunday of each month.<sup>417</sup>

A contributory factor to the expanding popularity of the centres seems to be found in the strong emphasis on cremations of Guru Granth Sahib as a respectful *seva* that engenders moral values and spiritual benefits. Daily the organization around the centres engages a large number of devotees who sew clothes for the scripture, organ-

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<sup>415</sup> As the statistics inform, between 1988 and 2000 about 80000 scriptures were cremated in Ludhiana and between year 1996 and 2000 40000 at Goindwal. In addition some 2.5 million *gutkas* and *sanchis* have been burnt (*Ajit*, 2000-09-18).

<sup>416</sup> *Gurdwara Majnu da Talla*, literally "the hillock of Majnu", is a historical Sikh shrine dedicated to a devout Muslim hermit who met with Guru Nanak and was blessed with enlightenment (Randhir 1990: 64 – 66, Gurmukh Singh 1995: 279 – 280).

<sup>417</sup> Phone-conversation with Param Singh, president of the *Agan Bhet Seva*, January 2007.

ize transportations, prepare the crematoria, collect donations, and the like. As the ceremonies are open for the public they generally attract hundreds of devotees and curious visitors. To many local Sikhs Narinder Singh has become an icon of true devotion and service for the Guru and the Sikh community. His organization confirms to kernel religious idioms and values that are approved by the authoritative tradition and has succeeded in strengthening the community by re-creating a collectively shared ceremony that will honor the Guru Granth Sahib in a proper way. In retrospect, the argument about what was before – a disrespectful handling of old scriptures – will appeal to most religious Sikhs who have seen the new ceremony. Narinder Singh, as a cultural entrepreneur, is well-aware of the importance of publicity to mobilize public support and awareness. He and his collaborator have invited religious key persons in the Punjab to observe the ritual events. In more recent years they have begun to utilize modern media in order to make the organization known to a global community. When I revisited *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Bhawan* at Goindwal Sahib in 2004, visitors – pilgrims and others – were offered to purchase a DVD-documentary about the new *seva* for Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhs in different parts of the world should not merely be guaranteed that their old scriptures are properly taken care of, but be able to watch the cremation from a distance. The use of modern media strives to establish confidence and global support for the local practices.

#### THE FIRE SACRIFICE

The choreography of spaces and acts of the fire ceremony or *Agan Bhet samskar* are carefully arranged to create a religious atmosphere and give due reverence to the Guru Granth Sahib. Printed texts which are worn out and missing pages will be dressed in robes of honor (*saropa*) and placed on royal beds to await the last ceremony. The cremation chamber (*Angitha Sahib*), considered pure and sacred, is the center of the ceremony. To create and maintain these qualities of the space only a selected number of initiated *Amritdhari* Sikhs are allowed to enter the chamber after customary ablutions. For as long as they dwell within that space they will wear wooden sandals so their feet do not touch the ground. Other participants and visitors are expected to do *matha tekna* at the threshold of the room and remain on the outside. During the whole ceremony a group of female devotees dressed in white – the traditional mourning color of Punjab – will perform devotional Sikh music (*shabad kirtan*) and sing accolades to the Guru Granth Sahib in folk tunes. An analysis of the morphology of the *Agan Bhet samskar* indicates that there are several constituent parts that are ever-recurrent and important in the ceremony. The internal structure of the cremation is organized around a set of nodal acts, many of which bear resemblance to rituals performed in cremation ceremonies for humans.

The *Agan Bhet samskar* is normally a four to five-hours-long program that begins shortly after sunrise. At first the congregation will gather in the local gurdwara to take a *Hukam*, recite the hymn *Anand Sahib*, and read the *Ardas*. In combination these acts frame the beginning of the ceremony and modifies the usual meaning of time and space by having the event sanctified by the Guru. Subsequently, participants will

congregate in the scriptural hospice and present an additional supplication before “the last journey” (*antim yatra*), or the actual transportation of texts to the crematoria will start. Men and women will break up into gender-divided groups of five people who will take turns at carrying the robed texts on their heads, one volume at a time. As customary for any conveyance of Guru Granth Sahib, five armed men (*panj pyare*) in traditional dresses will lead the way and the line of bearers is also accompanied with people holding umbrellas and swaying peacock feathers over the texts. All will chant the divine name (*Satnam Vahiguru*) during the procession, and when they reach the cremation chamber exclaim the Sikh *jaikara* (*Jo Bole So Nihal – Sat Sri Akal*). The solemnized transportation will continue, sometimes for several hours, until all scriptures have been moved to the crematoria and placed on iron beds side by side.

During the ceremony I observed and video-taped in Ludhiana on an October Sunday in 2000, Narinder Singh uncovered the scriptural robes and then soaked the pages of all the volumes with clarified butter (*ghi*), while an attendant was swaying a whisk over the book covers. Smaller prayer books and loose sheets placed on the opposite side of the scriptures were sprinkled with the fluid. After the last anointment, all scriptures were covered with colorful robes. Narinder Singh gathered the whole congregation in a semi-circle outside the entrance of the *Angitha Sahib* to present an *Ardas* in which he mentioned the work completed and all who have participated in the selfless work (*seva*). Immediately thereafter Narinder Singh lit a large steel-lighter, adorned with the *khanda* sign, and entered the chamber to offer the fire at different places in the room. At this juncture all participants were loudly crying out the Sikh *jaikara* repeatedly as the fire increased. When all the rows of scriptures were in flames Narinder Singh made his exit and closed the door to the chamber. Again he performed a final prayer in front of the sealed door before the ceremony ended in a collective *Vairagi kirtan* – the typical devotional Sikh music for human death ceremonies – for about an hour. The ceremony concluded with the serving of food from the communal kitchen (*langar*).

At four in the afternoon thirteen days later the door to *Angitha Sahib* was opened again. With wooden sticks Narinder Singh and the attendants collected the ashes of the burnt scriptures in large plastic bags. The iron grills were washed and scraped with water and milk. The bags with the remnants were carried on the heads



Ceremonial transportation of scriptures and prayer books to the cremation chamber

of devotees and placed on trolleys to be transported to a watercourse.<sup>418</sup> Similar to the cremation, the three-hour-long immersion ceremony was framed by stipulated Sikh worship acts. Before the procession started all participants gathered in the gurdwara for *matha tekna* before Guru Granth Sahib and presented a supplication. Singing devotional songs they slowly proceeded to the bridge of the watercourse. Narinder Singh was again the main actor who performed an additional *Ardas* and then poured bag after bag into a large special constructed pipe placed in the middle of the stream. When all ashes had been consigned to water Narinder Singh read one more supplication and all the participants gathered in the gurdwara to listen to his religious discourse (*katha*).

When the ritual elements and structure of *Agan Bhet samskar* are compared to human Sikh cremations, the resemblance is striking (See Figure 13 and the descriptions in Chapter 4). The cremation ritual for scriptures appears to have drawn much of the symbolic fabrics from a typical death ceremony in the human culture and adjusted these elements to a new ceremony for scriptural bodies. Just as the human corpse is dressed in new clothes and smeared with clarified butter (*ghi*) before being consigned to the fire, the book covers will be wrapped in robes and soaked in butter before they are offered to the flames. The religious acts which normally frame a human cremation – such as readings of *Ardas*, devotional funeral music, and recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib – have likewise become constitutive elements of the death ceremony to scriptures. Throughout the *Agan Bhet samskar* Narinder Singh and voluntary men and women are presented as key actors with ritual roles that are comparable to those assigned chief mourners in human cremations. In devotional acts and songs they behave as if they would mourn the worldly extinction of scriptures which have fulfilled a life-span.

The scrupulous care-taking of Guru Granth Sahib implicates some important presumptions about the scripture. The true Guru of the Sikhs is eternal and far beyond human levels, but divine words were revealed and made manifest through the utterances and the powerful agency of the worldly Gurus. By tradition the Guru Granth Sahib enshrines the sacred utterances and inhabits the agency of the Guru in its present manifested form (*sarup*) of a scripture made by paper and ink. Like the soul of a human being transmigrates, the worldly Guru seems to be subjected to a similar regenerating cycle of births and deaths. In the printing presses at Amritsar the Guru Granth Sahib takes birth and assumes a stipulated worldly form. Subsequently the Guru will be incorporated into the religious life of devoted Sikhs as an honoured guest cloaked in majestic splendour. When a scripture has completed a life-time its body will be brought to Goindwal Sahib or other cremation centres in the Punjab to be dissolved in the fire. As some Sikhs would argue, the cremation ritual returns the divine words, revealed to humanity, to the celestial origin when the aging scripture no longer can provide an honourable garb. Thus, the temporal body-form of Guru

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<sup>418</sup> At Goindwal Sahib the ashes will be consigned to the river Beas and in Ludhiana to the channel Nilow.

Granth Sahib has its own life-cycle with ceremonial events that will mark its entrance and departure from the community of disciples and existence in the world. Since the Guru Granth Sahib is for all times the personal Guru, who/which brings an eternal teaching and words into the world, the scriptural corpus will continually come to life through devotional practices enacted by Sikh disciples.

Figure 13.

#### RITUAL ELEMENTS OF HUMAN VERSUS SCRIPTURAL CREMATIONS

HUMAN	SCRIPTURE
1. The body is dressed in clean clothes	1. The book is dressed in robes
2. The body is placed on a bed at the house	2. The book is placed on a four-poster bed
3. <i>Ardas</i> is read before the body leaves the house	3. <i>Ardas</i> is read before the book leaves the bedroom
4. The body is carried to the cremation ground	4. The book is carried to the crematoria
5. The body is placed on the pyre	5. The book is placed on the grill
6. The body is smeared with <i>ghi</i>	6. The book is smeared with <i>ghi</i>
7. The granthi performs <i>Ardas</i> beside the pyre	7. Narinder Singh or some other <i>Amritdhari</i> Sikh performs <i>Ardas</i> outside the crematoria
8. The eldest son lights the pyre	8. Narinder Singh lights the pyre
9. The mourning family arranges <i>Akhand path</i> for the deceased	9. The congregation arranges <i>Khulla path</i> for thirteen days
10. The family arranges <i>Vairagi kirtan</i> in the gurdwara	10. The congregation arranges <i>Vairagi kirtan</i> outside the door of the crematoria
11. On the fourth day after cremation the family collect the ashes for immersion in water	11. Thirteen days after cremation the ashes of the books are collected and consigned to water.



## THREE



### FROM MANTRAS TO UNBROKEN READINGS WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THE GURU

This chapter will focus on the formal features of Sikh performances and worship forms which in different ways involve uses of the Guru Granth Sahib and the engagement in *gurbani* – the words and teaching of the Guru. Based on indigenous or emic typologies I have divided a broad spectrum of devotional practices into six main categories: recitation (*path*), singing (*kirtan*), exegetical narrations (*katha*), chanting and remembering (*simran*), praying (*Ardas*), and selfless service (*seva*) to the Guru, congregation and the society. To religious Sikhs these worship forms are seen as key practices in the spiritual teaching, institutionalized by the human Sikh Gurus. They are the devotional measures to make the divine revelation vividly alive and implement the Gurus' teaching in the social life of humans. In the following I will describe the ways in which Sikhs have organized these worship forms in the local community. What are the techniques and structure of performances that involves recitations, expositions, and singing of *gurbani*? What modes and conventions govern the performances and what are the frameworks and material with which the specialists and laity use? Illustrations of the formal features will include descriptions of the structure and organization of separate linguistic and para-linguistic acts carried out within the framework of performances, patterns of behaviour, and culture-specific notions related to the worship forms and separate *gurbani* texts. Although the conceptual dimension is analytically distinct from the domain of behavior (and normative prescriptions are not practices) there exists a dialectical relationship between the two. Access and appreciation of emic conceptions underlying the idioms of texts and performances can be used to shed light on the behavioral unfolding, that is, what local Sikhs are actually doing in their religious life.

#### 3.1. *PATH* – RECITING SACRED VERSES AND THE SCRIPTURE

Reciting *gurbani* is undoubtedly the most salient feature of Sikh religious life. Each day of the year, local Sikhs in Varanasi generally dedicate one to four hours, and some considerably more, to the activities of hearing and reciting passages from Guru Granth Sahib. At private houses individuals regularly repeat the *mulmantra*, the “root-mantra” and opening verse of the scripture, and recite single stanzas or hymns according to personal choosing. Apart from the prayers included in the “daily rule” (*nitnem*), which *Amritdharis* are obliged to read, individual Sikhs may take use of the

many compilations of selected hymns drawn from Guru Granth Sahib and Dasam Granth, such as *Sankat Mochan*, *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib*, *Panj Granthi* or *Shabad Hazare*,<sup>419</sup> to conduct recitals with some desired spiritual or material end in view. Others will complete a selected number of pages from the enthroned Sikh scripture as a part of their daily worship. At regular intervals, and particularly in connection with life-cycle rituals, the laity organizes meetings at private houses to jointly recite Guru Arjan's *Sukhmani Sahib*, a composition divided into twenty-four parts (*ashtapadian*) included in Guru Granth Sahib. Recitations also constitute the backbone of congregational worship within the gurdwaras: the day begins with the oral rendering of *Sukhmani Sahib* before dawn and ends with the reading of *Kirtan Sohila* at night. For a period of thirty or forty days preceding festivals commemorating the Sikh Gurus, professional reciters will conduct one unbroken recitation of the complete scripture (*Akhand path*) after another, the sound of which will blare out from loudspeakers on the gurdwara roof to reverberate the surrounding air with sacred words. Although the Guru Granth Sahib, as a written text, is fixed and bounded in structure, the experience of the text is both oral and aural among the Sikhs. The importance of recitations to any study of Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh religious practices cannot be overestimated. Recitation is believed to preserve the nature of the Gurus' utterances and teaching, whose meanings are expressed by its content in sound and writing. In view of this supreme status assigned to the Word, the Sikhs have developed sophisticated systems of reciting separate hymns and the complete scripture to suit various situations and needs in their social life. The mediation of *gurbani* has come to adopt a range of formal properties when transmitted to the context of performances and is believed to assist and produce divergent effects upon reciters and listeners. Before providing ethnographic examples of some of the more popular recitation methods in Varanasi, it is necessary to examine a few emic notions related to the act of reciting itself and some general culture-specific rules of space and purity that recitation, as a devotional practice, enforces.

#### READING, MEMORIZATION, AND WORSHIP

Although Sikh worship in Varanasi is centered on a written scripture and the literacy rate among urban community members is high, compared to their Hindu and Muslim neighbors, the words of the scripture and other compositions attributed *gurbani* status continue to be transmitted both orally and in writing: students imitate and practice sound produced by a teacher and read books. Even when printing technol-

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<sup>419</sup> For *Sankat Mochan* and *Dukhbhanjani Sahib* see below this chapter. *Panj Granthi* is the title of an anthology of *gurbani* verses that initially was confined to five (*panj*) hymns but in the course of time came to comprise more texts. A popular version of *Panj Granthi* was published by Bhai Vir Singh in 1906 and contains ten hymns in total. The collection *Shabad Hazare* consists of two sets of hymns: a group of seven hymns of Guru Arjan and Guru Nanak that are printed together and ten compositions by Guru Gobind Singh from Dasam Granth. As the title of this compilation presumes, those who recite these hymns daily will gain a thousand (*hazar*) merits.



ogy has made it possible to mass-produce sacred texts to common people, the oral culture pervades side by side to a written culture.<sup>420</sup> As many local Sikhs would argue, the insistence on oral transmission of *gurbani* is primarily a matter of theological and historical concern: divine words revealed to Guru Nanak phonetically from the sky and all the Sikh Gurus sang praises and delivered their teachings through utterances issued from their mouths, which at a later stage were recorded in writing. Chronologically orality proceeded the transmission of *gurbani* in writing and to preserve the original sacrosanct form and content of words contemporary devotees should aesthetically enunciate the Gurus' hymns, aloud or soundless, or listen. In their sacred teachings the Gurus emphasize the importance of savoring sacred words as a medium of religious truths and devotion. They requested their followers to "sing" (*gavie*) the praises of God, "recite" (*parh*, *uchrai*) and "listen" (*sunie*) to divine words, and to "tell" (*bolna*) stories of God. The performance genres that today stand at the core of Sikh worship are embedded in the scripture as instructions of the Gurus.<sup>421</sup> As religious Sikhs would argue, the Guru perpetually resides in the Guru Granth Sahib and continues to provide oral guidance whenever the scripture is read, sung, or listened to.

The sacred nature of any excerpt drawn from the Guru Granth Sahib forces a rendering in verbatim, a scrupulously re-citation or quotation: the enunciation of each syllable should be correct and follow the fixed lines, word by word, according to the same syntagmatic order as given in the standardized text, from beginning to end. Even the heading, name or signature of the author, the poetic meter of verses, as well as metrical signs within the texts will be pronounced in a recitation.<sup>422</sup> As far as possible, this should be carried out in an aesthetically appealing way to bring out the rhyme and rhythm embedded in the sacred poetry. *Gurbani* texts can be read in trans-

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<sup>420</sup> Scholars supporting the literacy thesis (see Introduction) have propounded that historically the religious elite communicated texts orally to an illiterate audience because of the limited access to handwritten manuscripts, but with literacy and the printing technology, which made manuscripts accessible to common people, oral traditions transformed or even faded away. Religious practices among the Sikhs in modern times seem to prove the opposite: when common people easily obtain written texts the oral transmission increases. Why people choose to mediate texts orally is more related to religious conceptions of the sacred oral character of texts, which is to be preserved in any reproduction.

<sup>421</sup> Oral reproduction of the Gurus' compositions seems to have been a key practice that evolved around the Sikh Gurus. The scribe Bhai Gurdas informs us that the community in Kartarpur recited *Japji* in the morning, sang and heard the Guru's hymns; performed *Sodar* in the evening, followed by a supplication and distribution of *karah prashad* (Jodh Singh 1998: 68). On the occasion of death, the scribe explains that Sikhs do not weep, but recite *Sohila* in the company of holy persons (Jodh Singh 1998: 154). A sympathetic reading of Bhai Gurdas would suggest that *gurbani* hymns were performed orally – recited and sung – by Sikh disciples as a part of daily discipline and in different life situations.

<sup>422</sup> Regarding recitations from handwritten manuscripts of Guru Granth Sahib, *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* from the eighteenth century advises Sikh disciples to read the scribe's ink-formula (*shahi vidi*) included in manuscripts (McLeod: 1987: 38).

lations into other spoken and written languages in order to grasp locutionary meanings, but in oral performances the reader should remain faithful to the stylistic and content-based features of the original Gurmukhi text. The stress on formal correctness is a distinguishing feature of the recitation genre: it is a mimetic reproduction or a quotation of an already fixed text that bears clear references to the author(s) or a believed origin, in this case preserving the immaculate substance and form of *gurbani*. Recitation aids to objectify texts, that is, endow them with a clearly defined and object-like identity that is not considered to be created by the reciter, nor dependent on her or his motives in the act of reciting (even though devotion and sincerity conditions are certainly normative prerequisites for any rendering of *gurbani*).<sup>423</sup> Thus when reciters are performing hymns from Guru Granth Sahib, committed to memory or by interpreting visual signs in writing, they say they act merely as intermediaries to convey sacred words for themselves and for others. They internalize the text by memorization or reading to quote it by means of the human mental and vocal apparatus. Professional reciters in Varanasi carefully point out that they only mediate *gurbani* in service of the congregation.

As a formalized mode of communication, recitation differs from ordinary uses of languages in that it is non-discursive, invariant and controlled by rules of vocabulary, syntax, meter, style and intonation. Unlike everyday speeches and narrations, recitations cannot be complemented with cross-references to other texts within the actual performance, nor can the text be expanded or added with additional statements. The hymns are to be repeated again and again according to the form laid down by the Gurus within the scripture. Given these features, the indigenous genre of recitation is clearly separated from other types of readings, like analytical studies of secular books or “readings” of poetry or fictional literature. Many Sikhs would quickly point out that reciting the scripture is indeed “a study of the Guru’s teaching” which provides spiritual and moral guidance. Comprehension of referential meanings in the Guru Granth Sahib is an important and legitimate motive for undertaking recitations. This notwithstanding, when local Sikhs pursue knowledge of the scriptural content they more often devote themselves to straightforward readings from *sanchi*, the Sikh scripture divided into two or more volumes that do not necessitate ritual installments, listen to live and recorded oral expositions (*katha*), or consult secondary exegetical literature. Owing to the authoritative and sacred status of *gurbani*, anyone who is to undertake a “reading” from the Guru Granth Sahib should accept the quoting convention or otherwise not read at all. It is considered blasphemous to browse through the scriptural pages more wantonly or look up sentences and repeat words only for investigating purposes. If the verb “read” in a more restricted sense of the word refers to the ability to view and interpret written signs in a given syntagmatic order, then reading is an activity that assists the verbatim and literatim rendering of recitations. People read the script in order to be able to re-cite and reveal the sacred hymns in sound.

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<sup>423</sup> See Chapter 5.

The ultimate learning of *gurbani* is to memorize the sacred verses and to know them “by heart”. Hymns of the Sikh scripture should ideally be read, heard and repeated until they are internalized. In both Hindi and Punjabi languages the idiom for memorizing text is “to place in the throat” (*kanth karna*).<sup>424</sup> To know texts is to memorize and make them “situated in the throat” (*kanthasth*). In Punjabi folklore the memorization of verses from the Guru Granth Sahib is envisaged as material possessions that are safely tied to the human body and can be brought anywhere. According to the popular aphorism “Bani kanth rupaya ganth” *gurbani* committed to memory is like having money stored and readily available for use.

When I inquired informants in the semi-structured interviews if they personally considered memorization of *gurbani* important seventy-four percent answered in the affirmative. The remaining part of the respondents emphasized that Sikhism does not prescribe any strict rules regarding memorized knowledge and readings of scripts will generate the same benefits as recitations from memory. Those who conceived memorization of *gurbani* important to a Sikh way of life regarded it an effective means to appropriate, internalize, and move with ease in the realm of *gurbani*. Many of my interlocutors paid attention to both practical and religious aspects. To know hymns by heart creates independence from prayer-books (*gutka*) that are otherwise required for readings and which always entail a set of regulative rules that serves to honour the sacred words. *Amritdhari* Sikhs, who should recite daily prayers irrespective of physical location, do not consider it proper to bring *gurbani* in writing to certain environments, such as public trains, marriage parties, and other social milieus where people may consume alcohol and smoke cigarettes. But “if *gurbani* is within you, you can always do recitations immediately and everywhere. When traveling you can mediate on *gurbani* within yourself”, a younger Sikh man said. Memorization provides human resources that make it easier to conduct and adjust recitations to social life. The processes of learning and remembering texts are by many viewed as acts to imbue and impregnate the human interior with the teaching and words of the Gurus. A young man argued, “The Guru Granth Sahib is our Guru, so if we memorize *gurbani* the Guru is within us”. Through intimate appropriation of sacred hymns the human body and mind will become a vessel of the Guru. As some would say, *gurbani* stored in memory has capacities to pacify the mind/heart in times of joy and sorrow and will follow the human soul, even after the event of death.

The significations that local Sikhs may ascribe to recitations are many, considering that people tend to explain recitations in terms of procured results from personal engagements with the Guru-scripture – a lovable husband or wife, healthy children, a decent home, a prosperous business, and so on – rather than articulating well-reasoned definitions of an emic performance genre. These responses, however, set out from a basic presumption that recitation is an act of worshipping God through the agency of the Gurus’ compositions in Guru Granth Sahib. People seldom say they “read” or “recite” (*parna*) the scripture or *gurbani* hymns, but to perform recitations is

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<sup>424</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 182, McGregor 1997: 153.

“to do recital” (*path karna*) and especially to do a “worship-recital” (*puja path*). The frequent use of the latter noun compound indicates that recitations are looked upon as an active mode of action and an exclusive worship entity, since *puja* is the more common term used for religious adoration and veneration.<sup>425</sup> To do recitation of *gurbani* texts is to do worship and righteous action which both indicates and presupposes *bhakti bhavna* – sincere devotion and faith.<sup>426</sup> As a male interlocutor remarked, the human Gurus provided praises of God and educated the Sikhs on the uses of sacred verses in worship: “they taught us how to do *puja* and how to do *path*” and thus to recite according to the rules of tradition fulfills the command of the Gurus.

Although it is ideally considered more favorable to conduct recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib by oneself, local notions give equal importance to oral and aural activities of *puja path*. Recitation is a liturgy that includes both the act of pronouncing words and listening to them in sound. Since *puja path* should be open for all and adjusted to individual abilities, listening to the recitals of others is sufficient for illiterates and others unable to memorize or read the Gurmukhi script. One oft-stated reason as to why Sikhs recite texts loudly is that people should be able to hear and benefit from the Gurus’ compositions in sound. When reciting aloud two favorable activities are fused together into one experience, or as one elderly Sikh woman said: “if we utter *path* loudly we get the benefit of hearing and speaking”. With the introduction of modern media in the twentieth century, recorded recitations on audiocassettes has become a popular means to do *puja path* in domestic spaces. “I do *path* as much as I can. I play cassettes and by listening I find peace,” an illiterate middle-aged Sikh woman said. She had purchased cassette recordings of daily prayers and the Sikh petition (*Ardas*) to perform complete worship sessions only by listening. The cassette culture has democratized the access to sacred words and brought about several changes in lay-practices, in some cases entirely replacing live recitations. Yet, the popularity of audio media demonstrates that the value of attentive hearkening sustains. In a prevailing oral culture Sikhs will consider hearing an active action of admitting Guru’s guidance in sound into the human interior.

Considering that the Guru is the words enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib, recitation, or *puja path*, is a sacramental act of “presencing” these words for enduring guidance. Just as the scripture is physically present in the gurdwara, recitations disclose the interior of the text. Particularly the unbroken cover-to-cover recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path*) is said to be an act of “inviting the Guru”, not only by installing the book physically at the shop, the house, or wherever the recitation is to be conducted, but reciting the complete text takes out the interior of the book and manifests the true Guru of *gurbani* in the world – in the space of one’s house, family,

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<sup>425</sup> A few of my interviewees also compare the recitations, and especially *Akhand path*, with the performance of Hindu *puja* in daily worship or those related to the different *samskara*.

<sup>426</sup> The number of recitations performed is often used as a measure of devotion and religiosity in humans.

social life and mind. As such, recitations become instrumental for positive communications with God.

When reciting hymns in defined spatio-temporal settings, people say they express thanks to God or appeal for divine support and protection in the most diverse life situations. More arduous recitations, of the whole scripture or regular recitals of chosen hymns over a prolonged time period, are often spoken of as an offering or sacrifice of resources, such as time and efforts, that humans make to impart their inner wishes to a divine recipient. Before commencing the chosen *path* the reciter will present the *Ardas* by which he or she will take permission from the Guru to perform a recitation, and verbally enumerate which type of *path* is to be conducted for whom and for which purpose.<sup>427</sup> In this formal petition the reciter may make a conditional promise or vow to complete the recitation within a given timeframe, and kindly request God to act favorably or lend practical assistance in return.<sup>428</sup> The promise can also be formulated like a votive gift for divine help extended when a personal desire or wish has already been fulfilled. People carry out these manipulative or reciprocal acts within the framework of mutual human-divine relationship and through the agency of *gurbani*. The reciter gives a “gift” of devotion to God by taking out time to recite the Guru’s words to gain godly favors or express thanks for blessings already received. At the end of a completed recitation the devout reciter may bring material offerings, such as money and food, to the gurdwara and again present a petition in which he or she requests the divine recipient to accept the recitations as an offering and to excuse errors unintentionally made. Through this speech act, directed to God while facing the Guru Granth Sahib, the completed *puja path* is consecrated as an offering, and in return the reciter will receive food blessed by the Guru (*karah prashad*).

As the following sections will illustrate, recitations may be conducted for the most diverse reasons, and above all for the cause of praising God without any desired material or spiritual goal in view. Reciting *gurbani* remains a means of devotion and communication with the divine through the agency of the Guru, the words enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib.

#### REGULATIVE DEVICES

When Sikhs perform *puja path* there is a set of regulative devices of ethical concerns that rely on conventions already existing outside the religious setting. These rules are not necessarily constitutive for the actual recitation, but perceived as regulative in the sense that they constrain the act of reciting and may affect the expected results of the

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<sup>427</sup> It is customary to go the *gurdwara* and let the *granthi* perform this supplication on behalf of the family or an individual before the actual recitation starts. In performances of *Akhand path*, the *granthi* in duty may also take permission from the *sadhsangat* to perform the recitation (by enouncing the words “*sadhsangat ki agya ho*”).

<sup>428</sup> In Punjabi language the conjunct noun verb *sukh sukhni* signifies the act of making a promise or vow to offer something to God.

enactment. The breaking of these rules is considered as a form of offence or disrespect, especially to the Guru Granth Sahib, even if it does not disqualify the performance.<sup>429</sup>

Bathing is considered a minimal precondition for any type of reading from Guru Granth Sahib and of *gurbani* hymns. The noun used for bath is *ishnan* (or *ishnan karna* “to do a bath”), which applies to a range of different ritualized baths performed in sacred ponds, pools, and rivers at pilgrimage centres or ablutions in ordinary tap water. In Varanasi, a clear distinction is made between two particular baths or ways of bathing: *panj ishnana*, or ‘the five ablutions’, which refers to the washing of feet, hands and face/mouth in cold water that should precede all types of recitations. *Kesh ishnan*, on the other hand, signifies a complete bath or full shower of the body in cold water, including the washing of one’s head and hair (*kesh*), and dressing up in clean clothes afterwards.<sup>430</sup> In life situations which necessitate a more careful purification to overcome impure states, such as after a menstrual period, childbirth, or the death of a family member, the water used in a *kesh ishnan* should be warmed before being used.

The daily routine for many Sikhs in Varanasi, and *Amritdhari*s in particular, begins with a bath before sunrise, either at one’s house or in the gurdwara, followed by the reading of *Japji Sahib* or the daily prayers on an empty stomach. Many carry out the morning bath in cold water with a short *simran*, or meditation and recitation of the divine name. A middle-aged *Amritdhari* woman described her awakening and the early shower as the two first “battles” of the day that could only be conquered by invoking the name of God:

When getting up early in the morning...to get away from the blankets is like a battle. That is the first battle of the day. The second is when you take a shower. When you put water on you the name of God comes out. Then the hands of God will be on you. After the shower, the only thing that comes into your mind is to do *path* and take the name of God.

Even for Sikhs who do not perform readings by themselves, but listen to the singing and recital of others, a morning bath is considered obligatory. An elder Sikh man who had established a custom of watching the morning liturgy at Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, broadcasted on the TV channel *Alfa Punjabi*, emphasized that he always took a full bath before seating himself on the sofa in front of the television. The morning bath is considered to purify an individual for the whole day up to twelve at mid-

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<sup>429</sup> See Humphrey & Laidlaw’s discussion on “regulative rules” with regard to Jain puja performances (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 119). In the Sikh case, the way to correct a violation is to ask for forgiveness in a prayer.

<sup>430</sup> Since *Amritdhari* Sikhs should not remove any of five symbols from their body when sleeping or bathing, they will tie the ribbon holding the dagger (*kirpan*) around their head or waist while taking a *kesh ishnan*. The prescribed underwear (*kaccha*) will be exchanged by first pulling off one leg from the old shorts and putting on the new ones and then do the same with the other leg.

night, which marks the break of a new day. Depending upon individual duties and preferences in the daily run, people may take additional baths throughout the day or just squirt water over their hands and feet, and pour some on the head in more symbolic acts of purification before they enter the gurdwara or start *gurbani* recitations. In any case, after the stroke of midnight a full bath is mandatory for all who intend to devote themselves to recitations.<sup>431</sup>

The purification rules are more pronounced when it comes to complete readings of the Guru Granth Sahib. A full bath with hair wash is an essential preliminary for a reciter about to sit in the physical presence of the Guru-scripture, particularly when the reading to be undertaken is unbroken (*Akhand path*) and thus requires a higher degree of purity.<sup>432</sup> If this cannot be carried out due to lack of facilities or some other circumstance the reciter should at least wash his or her mouth, hands and legs. Since the mouth and the vocal cords are the vehicles to transform written words of *gurbani* into uttered sounds, the mouth and throat should be carefully rinsed before a reading lest it would be “tasted” (*jutha*) and impure by the mixture of saliva and food.<sup>433</sup> Many of the professional reciters in Varanasi did not take a sip of anything drinkable after having had the purifying bath. A cleansed mouth is a matter of course before any type of reading that involves oral reproduction of *gurbani* just as the washing of one’s hands is before touching the physical scripture. If for some reason a person cannot comply with these regulative rules he or she should simply not touch the scripture installed, but only listen to recitals.

According to an unwritten precept, menstruating women are not to perform recitations nor physically touch scriptures, *gutkas*, or other texts containing *gurbani* in writing. A Sikh woman explained:

During our menstrual period we do not touch Guru Granth Sahib ji for five days, not even *gutkas*. We do not even enter the room of Guru Granth Sahib ji, but give our *namaskar* [greetings] from outside the room. During this period we only meditate.

For the four to five days women are menstruating they consider themselves to be ritually impure. Female domestic *granthis*, who are taking care of the daily rituals of Guru Granth Sahib in private gurdwaras, hand over the religious responsibilities to

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<sup>431</sup> As I was instructed, if one is to begin a recital before midnight and continue reading after the stroke of twelve it is obligatory to take a preliminary full bath.

<sup>432</sup> It is noteworthy that more arduous readings of Guru Granth Sahib seem to entail stricter rules about purity. Several of my interlocutors emphasized that *Akhand path* and especially *Sampat path*, the toughest recitation to perform, always requires a *kesh ishnani* in hot water before each reading session. To accomplish a “pure” (*shuddh*) performance of *Akhand path*, paid reciters should always take a head shower before reciting if they have visited their families in between a reading relay. Broken readings, on the other hand, presuppose a daily morning bath, but the reciter needs only to clean the hands and mouth before starting a reading.

<sup>433</sup> Except for blessed food (*prashad*) that has been offered to (and tasted by) the Guru.

their husbands, sons, or some other family member during the temporary break. Taken into consideration that *Amritdhari* women are obliged to read the daily five hymns, memorizing *gurbani* texts becomes a momentous activity for many. One woman said she recited her daily prayers soundless from memory when having her monthly period; she was “thinking of the *path* in her mind” as she considered it disrespectful to pronounce *gurbani* with her mouth when her body was exposed to impurity.

Most of the women I spoke with asserted they avoided all kinds of physical contacts with written *gurbani*, and especially the scripture enthroned, for as long as they menstruated. There is no explicit rule related to female impurity within the public domain of the gurdwaras, save that women are not to work as reciters while menstruating.<sup>434</sup> Just like the domestic setting they must take a full bath with hair wash before reinstated in duty. When I, as a woman, consulted a local *granthi* on proper conducts of women during their periods, he explained that these matters always fall to individual decision and are obviously not controllable. In the same moment, however, he emphasized that a “wise” woman will not even enter the gurdwara while menstruating, but simply does *matha tekna* at the threshold and takes its “dust” on her forehead. Like saliva and other bodily fluids, the menstruation blood from the female body entails cultural notions of pollution and should not contaminate the physical scripture or the immediate space around it.

In addition to ablutions, any Sikh preparing for a recitation should be properly dressed, take off shoes or sandals and cover the head: women with a shawl and men with handkerchief, turban, or the small cloth used under the turban. This rule applies to all recitations of *gurbani* from memory or *gutkas*, the pocket-sized breviaries containing single hymns or the daily prayers (*nitnem*), and irrespective of location and other situational circumstances. On a train journey, for instance, a Sikh may first wash his mouth and hands, curl up his legs and bare feet on the seat, and then begin a reading of the morning prayer *Japji Sahib* from memory in a low voice. Even when *Kirtan Sohila* is recited nearby the funeral pyre at the outdoor cremation place, the *granthi* and chief mourners will slip out of their sandals to stand barefoot on the muddy ground before the recitation starts. Particularly when a reading is given from a *gutka* do people hesitate to physically touch the book cover, unless the hands have been washed and shoes removed: “You would not feel comfortable to lay your hands on a *gutka*”, a young man said. To honor *gurbani* contained in the *gutkas* Sikhs enfold the prayer books in cloths, sometimes home-tailored wrappers made of colorful textiles that are neatly sized to the book cover and embroidered with the *Ik omkar* sign. When *gutkas* are brought for recitals outside the house they carry the books in a sheltered place, in a handbag or near the heart in the front pocket of a shirt. Only when

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<sup>434</sup> The ritual impurity caused by menstruation is by some propounded as an explanatory reason for the absence of women on *granthi* posts and other religious occupations in gurdwaras.



the hair is veiled and the feet are bare will a Sikh unfold the cloth and pay respect to the book by taking the cover to the forehead and bow.

The outer space is another important consideration. Many interlocutors said the gurdwara or the private house provided the two best places for *gurbani* recitations for several reasons. Firstly, a recitation should be conducted in a pure and peaceful place for respect of the sacred hymns. Families with a gurdwara at their house did most of the daily readings within the bounded space around the Guru Granth Sahib. Others committed to recitations from *sanchis* or *gutkas* for fixed time periods would temporarily set aside a separate and clean room in the house. For instance, when the daughter of one family was doing *puja path* in her room, the other family members were advised to not enter the room without ablutions, especially if they had contracted pollution by attending funeral ceremonies and the like. Her mother, not privileged a secluded space for her daily recitation of the composition *Sukhmani Sahib*, used set off to Gurubagh Gurdwara at dawn since she considered the family house too “noisy” with people coming and going and not “proper” for *gurbani* recitals. Secondly, many Sikhs believe that *gurbani* recitals have power to purify and bless both people and material objects confined within the space of a recitation. “People arrange *path* for purity of the house and also for purity of their minds”, one woman said. This notion comes distinctly forth in the practices related to readings *gurbani* anthologies such as *Sankat Mochan* or *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib*: some keep a pot of water beside them, believing that the words being recited materialize and convert the water into purifying nectar-water, which they later sprinkle onto family members and objects in the house.

All the same, when a *puja path* does not demand the physical presence of the Sikh scripture it can be acted out almost anywhere. The prayer *Rahiras Sahib*, which ought to be recited in the evening and during the most hectic working hours of trading people, is frequently enacted in outdoor spaces. At the shop, hospital, or while attending a social function, the devout Sikh temporarily leaves the duties or the party to find a secluded spot appropriate for a reading in privacy. “Guru Maharaj ji told us that God is everywhere and therefore you can do *path* at any location”, a man in his twenties said. Instructively he added, “but if you are doing *path* in the *gurdwara* you must face Guru Granth Sahib ji and not turn your back to Guru Maharaj ji.”

The ability to mentally focus on enunciation and the meanings of the recited words is another reason as to why Sikhs create and regulate recitation spaces. “You should do *path* attentively (*dhyān se*), nothing else should come to your mind”, an elder Sikh woman informed. Since the oral-aural recitation is an act of worship, the devotee is expected to take out time only for devotion to God without distracting attention from the reading or listening. All thoughts and feelings should be directed towards the recitation, performed from beginning to end without pauses for any other talk or actions. In general people pay great respect to friends and family members committed to *gurbani* recitations by leaving them alone, in their room or a corner of the house, for as long as they are reading. A host throwing a party in the evening is considered extremely courteous if he or she considerately asks the guest if

they wish to perform *Rahiras Sahib* and provide a suitable space for their recital. To aid the concentration, many emphasized the importance to take a seat on the ground in a straight and alert position, preferably *chaukri* – the typical sitting posture with legs folded and drawn up without leaning against any wall. Professional reciters often assume this posture when conducting readings from Guru Granth Sahib and some insisted on the necessity to keep the position throughout a *puja path*, at least of shorter hymns.

Yet another technique to remain focussed on the sound and meaning is to read in company with others. A middle-aged woman, who claimed she was a lie-abled since childhood (which caused her mother to persistently pray to God for early morning habits), used to invite her mother whenever she undertook the discipline to recite *Sukhmani Sahib* in the mornings. “I call up mum to recite with me, because sometimes I doze off during *path* ... so if I would miss out something [words], then she managed it [to recite correctly].” To recite together with family members or participate in congregational recitations becomes a method of evading human errors and lack of concentration.

#### NITNEM – THE DAILY ROUTINE

All Sikhs who have undergone the *Khande di pahul* ceremony to become *Amritdhari* Sikhs are obliged to observe a daily discipline to recite a collection of hymns derived from Guru Granth Sahib and Dasam Granth. As a part of the morning liturgy they should read the five following compositions: the forty-versed *Japji Sahib* written by Guru Nanak which is given as an opening hymn of Guru Granth Sahib (on page 1 to 8); the three compositions *Jap Sahib*, *Tav Prashad Savaiyye* and *Chaupai Sahib* ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh and included in Dasam Granth; and the forty stanzas of the composition *Anand Sahib* by Guru Amardas in Guru Granth Sahib (on page 917 to 922). Performing these matins goes by the self-contained concept of *panj banian ka path*, or “the recitation of five compositions/utterances”.<sup>435</sup>

When day and night come together at dusk baptized Sikhs should furthermore recite *Rahiras Sahib*, a prayer which synthesizes a set of stanzas: it opens with a couplet (*shalok*) by Guru Nanak, followed by nine stanzas of Guru Nanak, Guru Ramdas, and Guru Arjan that are given in Guru Granth Sahib (on page 8 to 12). Thereafter comes three different poetic verses (a *Chaupai*, *Savaiya* and *Dohra*) of Guru Gobind Singh and the first five stanzas and the fortieth stanzas of the already mentioned *Anand Sahib*. The *Rahiras Sahib* concludes with *Mundavani*, the “seal” which ends the Sikh scripture, and a couplet (*shalok*) by Guru Arjan. Before going to sleep the day is

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<sup>435</sup> Given the popularity and frequent ritual use of *Sukhmani Sahib* a few interviewees (non-*Amritdhari*) replaced *Jap Sahib* or *Tav Prashad Savaiyye* with this composition when they explained the notion of *panj banian*. Of all the texts included in the *nitnem*, *Jap Sahib* and *Tav Prashad Savaiyye* are the only hymns that my interlocutors seldom recited separately in other ritual contexts. Many considered the two texts too difficult to memorize and semantically understand.

brought to an end by reading *Kirtan Sohila*, or the “Hymn of Praise”, made up of three verses of Guru Nanak and one each by Guru Ramdas and Guru Arjan. *Kirtan Sohila* is also included in Guru Granth Sahib (on page 12 to 13). Altogether these seven hymns frame ordinary days of *Amritdhari* Sikhs throughout the year and constitute the *nitnem*, their “daily routine” or order of reciting compositions of the Gurus.<sup>436</sup>

That local Sikhs ascribe soteriological values to the formal and routine performance of these hymns is indisputable. To take the nectar of *panj banian* and adopt an *Amritdhari* identity is to become a “true” and “complete” disciple of the Guru, who outwardly wears the five Sikh symbols and daily recite the compositions.<sup>437</sup> At the time of the Khalsa ceremony, Sikhs are ritually appropriated the *panj banian* by means of ingesting the nectar-water of the texts. As the rite is designed and practiced today, the five men symbolizing the *panj pyare* will recite one hymn each – first *Japji Sahib*, then *Jap Sahib*, *Tav Prashad Savaiyye*, *Chaupai Sahib* and finally *Anand Sahib* – while stirring the water with the double-edged sword (*khanda*). The neophytes will then be given the nectar-water, imbued with the five compositions, for ingestion and then have it sprinkled onto his or her eyes and hair five times each. These acts of imbibing *gurbani* are believed to purify and recompose their previous identities to a new and shared identity as Sikhs of the Guru. As locals look upon the *nitnem*, it is not merely a precept stipulated by tradition but a “gift” (*den*) and “command” (*hukam*) ordained by Guru Gobind Singh which will bestow spiritual merits, even liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. A woman in her fifties illustratively said:

The *Sardars* [Sikhs] are surviving because of their *nitnem*. One day all humans will get a chance to go on the right path in life. The Hindus believe in the planet mars (*mangal*)... if you would do bad actions (*karma*) the planet will not forgive you, not even after death. You will have to suffer. That will not affect the person who does *nitnem*.

The regular discipline of reciting or hearkening the *panj banian* in the morning and *Rahiras Sahib* and *Kirtan Sohila* at night is crucial for gaining benefits and maintaining a Khalsa identity. The daily recitations should be continuous, without fail, lest the individual Sikh would “break the *amrit*” and be considered apostate (*patit*). The stress on regularity is given various significations: it is the Guru’s order that should be obeyed. It is also a means to acquire recitations habits which will create deep interest in the Gurus’ teaching that will eventually bring about a change in the moral and bodily constitution of people.

When I asked a local *granthi* if he had observed any apparent changes in those who are *nitnemi*, or “regular in routine”, he replied:

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<sup>436</sup> *Nitnem* is similar to the Sanskrit compound *nitya karm*, meaning a daily act, rite or obligation.

<sup>437</sup> For local views on *Amritdhari* identity, see Chapter 2.

After taking *amrit* and by doing regular *path* people will start to experience *gurbani*. Their attitudes and behaviour change. Before they were only chattering with other people, but after coming in this line their behaviour totally change. They became very humble and polite. Before they were not donating to others but after this they start to donate. If someone suffers from a disease or difficulty they will overcome this trouble when they do *path* of *nitnem* with regularity. So yes, we do see changes.

Several of my *Amritdhari* friends admitted it was indeed hard to observe the routine discipline, at least in the beginning, and expressed fear of not being able to fulfill the obligation. Non-*Amritdhari* Sikhs, with no intention of undergoing the Khalsa ceremony, alleged it was too much effort to get up before dawn to recite the *panj banian* every day. The modern life with late working hours and television made them keep late hours. Instead, they would occasionally commit themselves to perform all the compositions of *nitnem* for an assigned time period, such 11 or 40 days, or pick out a composition they liked for daily readings.<sup>438</sup>

In this context it is interesting to observe that no less than eighty-seven percent of male and female respondents of all ages – *Amritdhari* and others – in the semi-structured interviews claimed they knew specific *gurbani* hymns or verses by heart, while the remaining part said they had not committed complete texts to memory but tried to follow recitations with help of prayerbooks (*gutkas*). When informants in the first category were asked to enumerate the hymns they had committed to memory the majority named the seven hymns included in the *nitnem* (See Figure 14). Seventy-seven percent stated they had memorized parts or the complete text of *Japji Sahib* and a slightly fewer number, seventy-one percent, knew *Rahiras Sahib* by heart, whereas about half of the respondents were able to recite the remaining texts of *nitnem*, entirely or in parts, from memory. A few remarked that the composition *Jap Sahib*, ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh, was particularly hard to read and remember because of its language. There is no obligation to memorize the daily prayers, but from a practical viewpoint it is recommendable since people are able to perform the *nitnem* everywhere – on journeys, social visits, or parties – if hymns are learnt by heart. Many will take use of *gutkas* or recite with other devotees in the congregation for the fear of forgetting or leaving out single words.<sup>439</sup> Although the larger part of the respondents who had committed the daily hymns to memory were *Amritdhari* Sikhs, the field data implies that devotees who do not contemplate a Khalsa identity still memorize *gur-*

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<sup>438</sup> A businesswoman and *Amritdhari* Sikh in her fifties instructed her friends to at least recite *Japji Sahib* before noon and do *Rahiras Sahib* at dusk in order to surmount all kinds of troubles in social life. In addition, she added, “It [the recitation] will keep you fast and alert”.

<sup>439</sup> A seventy-year-old *Amritdhari* man who had memorized all the seven compositions save for *Jap Sahib* said: “For correct *path* I use a *gutka*. I keep a *gutka* of *Rahiras Sahib* with me. When I am not coming to the house at night I can still do the *path* of *Rahiras Sahib* wherever I am.”

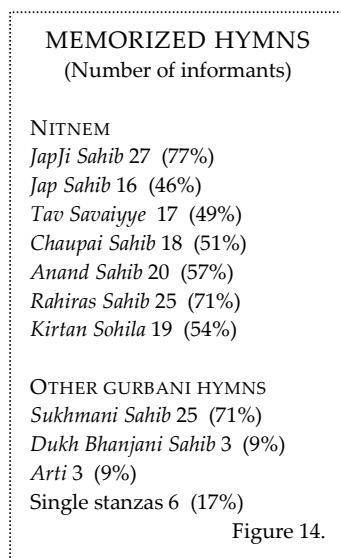


Figure 14.

*bani* and will recite *Japji Sahib* in the morning and *Rahiras Sahib* at dusk, or listen to recitals in the gurdwara, as a part of their daily routine.<sup>440</sup>

A few remarks should be passed about the opening hymn of the scriptural corpus, *Japji Sahib*, which undeniably is the most treasured *gurbani* hymn among all Sikhs. At an early age children are encouraged to learn and pronounce the prefatory *mulmantra*, or “root mantra” of *Japji Sahib*, which starts with the numeral “1” (*ik*) and continues to praise the qualities of God in a denominative manner. In Sikh practices the *mulmantra* is an invocation frequently used for continuous repetitions (*jap*) and remembrance of divine qualities. The illocutionary force of reciting the mantra is equal to a declaration of acceptance and adherence to the Sikh religion.<sup>441</sup> In different performances of *gurbani* the sacred formula also functions as a marker to frame the transition from an ordinary speech context to a

<sup>440</sup> In both Gurubagh Gurdwara and Nichibagh Gurdwara all the five compositions of *nitnem* would be recited directly after the *Prakash* ceremony at 3.30 in the morning and takes about 45 minutes to complete (because it requires aloud enunciation), whereas the 25-minutes singing recital of *Rahiras Sahib* usually starts at 5.45 pm during the winter seasons and one hour later in the summer.

<sup>441</sup> A similar “illocutionary force” comes forward in the uses of the calligraphic inscriptions of the *mulmantra*, and the contemporary practice of tattooing (*godna*) its first syllable – *Ik omkar* – on the right hand or wrist. In Varanasi district, several Sikh converts of lower Hindu castes have their hands or other body parts decorated with divergent tattoos, either caste-signs or emblems of a deity. At the time of their conversion to Sikhism, the *Ik omkar* syllable was added to the bodily canvas to designate a new religious commitment and belonging. In diasporic contexts the social aspects of bodily inscriptions seems to be even more tangible, especially among young Sikh men who visit tattoo artists to decorate their bodies with religious symbols like the *khanda*, or calligraphic designs of *Ik omkar*, *Satnam Vahiguru*, in order to mark out a connection to the Sikh religion and epitomize a cultural-ethnic identity. The Sikh signs and formulas become deictic markers of identity that are written on the canvas of human skin. The tattoos can also be viewed as tools and tokens of worship. A middle-aged Sikh man who in his teens tattooed the *Ik omkar* sign on his right hand “just for fun” and to display his religious identity said the tattoo eventually became a sign to remind him of God and prevented from him from bad conducts, such as drinking alcohol, stealing, etc. From a symbol representing a social identity, the tattoo grew into sign of divine supervision, which for him worked as a personal memento and vehicle to meditate on God. On the Indian subcontinent, tattooing sacred names and branding emblems of divinities on the human body and material objects appears to be a ancient custom (Lamb 2002, Shah 1985), which in the Punjab has been practiced among several Vaishnava orders and religious pilgrims (See Rose 1919). The implications of contemporary tattoo practices among Sikhs and Punjabis in India and abroad would make an interesting subject of study.

performance context. Because of the thematic exploration within the main text, *Japji Sahib* is generally conceived as Guru Nanak's instruction on the path towards liberation and some would even say that a recitation of the hymn will grant the same result. A middle-aged woman exemplified:

All these compositions (*bani*s) are like sweet candies with different branches. Whichever *bani* you will swallow you will get a taste of it [*gurbani*]. But *Japji Sahib* is higher... it will make your ship cross the ocean of existence (*bhavsagar*).<sup>442</sup>

The first longer poem in Guru Granth Sahib, *Japji Sahib*, is believed to open the door to the sacred teaching included therein. Reciting the hymn is therefore betokening a good start in any new activity of human life. Adult Sikhs of all categories often adopt morning routines of reciting the whole *Japji Sahib* or at least a few verses before going to work or starting the housework.<sup>443</sup> Following the structure given in Guru Granth Sahib *Japji Sahib* should be the first *gurbani* composition rendered in the beginning of a new day and precede all other recitations.<sup>444</sup> In Sikh ceremonies, a recitation of *Japji Sahib* marks the beginning of life itself: the *mulmantra* will be the first verse whispered in the ear of a newborn child. Later on the child will be given a purifying water-nectar (*amrit*), over which the first five and the last verses of *Japji Sahib* have been recited, before the child is shown to family and friends and incorporated into social life. According to a popular notion, if one is unable to recite the entire *Japji Sahib* due to illiteracy, illness, or some other reason, one can still obtain its virtues by completing the first *panj pauri*, or "five verses" of the composition. If one cannot accomplish this, then at least the *mulmantra* should be recited. When this is rendered impossible, the minimum act would be to repeat the name of God (*Vahiguru*) 108 times daily. The rationalization of recitals to a few single words of *Japji Sahib* is not believed to reduce the effects of recitations if propelled by pure devotion, but conceived as practical methods of adjusting the appropriation of benefits to individual ability. In metaphorical terms, people would say *Japji Sahib* is the milk, *panj pauri* the cream, and the opening *mulmantra* the churned butter of the teaching enshrined in *Japji Sahib* which will impart mental strength, peace, purity, and ultimately liberation.

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<sup>442</sup> In North Indian bhakti poetry, the familiar image of *bhavsagar*, "the troubled waters of existence", occurs as a metaphor for the cycle of birth and death. In popular beliefs it is said to be a liminal stage of the human soul between a death and a new rebirth. The foetus in the stomach of a mother is said to reside in *bhavsagar*, praying to God for rescue from the ocean. The deity or Guru will help humans to cross this ocean and safely reach the other side, that is, liberates from the cycle of rebirths.

<sup>443</sup> One woman only devoted herself to recitation of *Japji Sahib* and *Jap Sahib* those days she woke up early, however she refrained from readings when she got up from bed later in the morning.

<sup>444</sup> In the early eighteen century *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* a bath, recitation of *Japji Sahib* five times, a reading of *Ardas*, and a visit to the gurdwara for offerings and prostration is prescribed as the daily morning discipline of Sikhs (McLeod 1987: 33).

Looking at the ways in which *Amritdhari* Sikhs adjust their daily discipline to an everyday life, temporal considerations are of importance, although not in a rigid manner. There is no exact time prescribed for the morning recitations, more than it should be completed within the range of *amritvela*, the nectar hours that span from two to six in the morning. Apparently the time period of *amritvela* was earlier adjusted to an agricultural lifestyle. Religious activities such as reciting *gurbani* would frame a working day which started before dawn and ended in the late afternoon at sunset. Considering that the concept of *amritvela* is associated with religious peace and merits in the Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhs will attach various meanings to waking before sunrise. An elderly *Amritdhari* man saw several advantages:

The first benefit you will get from awakening in *amritvela* is that your age will increase. And secondly, it is the best time to remember God. There will be no one to disturb you. You can concentrate. If you want to take the name of truth then you recite in the morning. This time you can reach God. Even the sants and mahatmas used to get up early, and many people get up at 4, some even at 2.30. If you take care of *amritvela* there will be no troubles [in the day]. During that time you do not think about work. You get up, take a bath and think only of *puja path*. There is nothing to say about those people who sleep until 8.

Although the majority of my interlocutors were accustomed waking and taking a bath between 4 and 5 in the morning, a few zealous *Amritdhari* men, all in their twenties and unmarried, made solemn efforts to follow a practice of rising between 2 and 2.30 in the night to recite the *panj banian*. One of them, a bachelor working full-time at a store retailing spare parts, asserted that *amritvela* falls between midnight and 4 am, and the earlier people would get up from bed the more merit-bestowing would the morning prayers be. He had scheduled his daily routine in the following way:

#### PERSONAL MORNING ROUTINE

Awake at 3.00 am

Take a full shower with hair wash

Short *simran* on the *gurmantra* (*Vahiguru*)

Recite *Panj banian* (approx. 25 – 30 minutes):

*Japji Sahib*, 10 minutes

*Jap Sahib*, 6 minutes

*Tav Prashad Savaaiyye*, 4 minutes

*Chaupai Sahib*, 2 minutes

*Anand Sahib*, 3 minutes

Read *Ardas*

Take tea

Take rest

Go to the gurdwara at 6 am for *matha tekna*, to give an offering  
and listen to *kirtan*  
Return home  
Take food  
Go to work at 9 am

It is noteworthy that taking a bath and visiting the gurdwara in the morning is thought to be an essential part of *nitnem*. Reciting the *panj banian* should also follow the same syntagmatic order as set down by the Khalsa rite, beginning with *Japji Sahib* and ending with *Anand Sahib*. When this man performed the full version of *Ardas* which always followed the recitals, he used to stand barefoot on the floor in his private room, facing a cupboard, decorated with a poster of Guru Gobind Singh and in which he kept all *gutkas*. "The main cause for doing *Ardas* is *gurbani*", he said. "In that I ask God's forgiveness if I had made any errors [in the recitation] and request for power and knowledge to recite *gurbani* correctly. I also pray for my business ...that it will be profitable." Some mornings when feeling drowsy he would extend his sleep with one hour and without rest ride directly on his scooter to the gurdwara a few kilometres away. With working days and office hours suited to the modern life, businessmen will start and stop work later than the pace of a day in an agricultural society. To avoid weariness and maintain a satisfactory working and social life, other *Amritdhari* men and women in trading professions would likewise complete the morning recitations before dawn and take a nap before they begun their working day at 9.30 or 10 am. If time did not permit, they considered it adequate to read *Japji Sahib* at dawn and complete the other hymns later in the morning before noon.

In homes keeping gurdwaras the women would carry out the installation (*Prakash*) of Guru Granth Sahib and take the daily *Hukam* before they performed all *panj banian*. Others recited *Japji Sahib* directly after the *Prakash* ceremony, and then read *Ardas*, took the *Hukam*, and performed the remaining four compositions in a successive order. In all cases the reading of the full *Ardas* text in a standing posture subsequent to the recitation of *Japji Sahib*, or all the *panj banian*, is held to be a momentous stage of the morning liturgy. "I want to have my *path* of *panj banian* noted down in the abode of God... and forgiveness if I have made any mistakes", an *Amritdhari* woman in her fifties explained her reasons for the concluding supplication. Other *Amritdhari* Sikhs stated they would also read the full *Ardas* text after the hymn *Rahiras Sahib* at dusk and present an abbreviate form of the supplication (*Choti Ardas*) subsequent to the recitation of *Kirtan Sohila* before sleep.

#### COMMITMENT TO SINGLE VERSES

Apart from the daily *nitnem*, local Sikhs – *Amritdharis* and others – often pledge to recite a single verse or a complete composition for a fixed number of times whenever the need arises. These recitations usually involve a commitment to carry out readings daily within a freely chosen or prescribed time period, formulated like a promise



between human and God, either to seek divine assistance in a particular life situation or to reciprocally express devotion and thanks on behalf of oneself or others. The commitment is verbally articulated and confirmed by means of performing the Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) before starting the reading. Which *gurbani* text is chosen usually depends upon the particular reason for which a recitation is undertaken or selected according to individual preferences. Some of my interlocutors had chosen individual hymns from the scripture, which they always kept with them throughout life and recited whenever they experienced a need to do so. Others consulted people, who were considered knowledgeable in *gurbani* and possessed certain spiritual powers, for guidance. Within the gurdwara, for instance, the *granthi* will frequently tell devotees to recite *Japji Sahib* or *Sukhmani Sahib* in the early morning hours for a month or two in a row to attain mental peace. When the desired ends are more specified he will supply special passages from the Guru Granth Sahib along with reading instructions.

Another way to choose hymns for defined purposes is to confer with the various anthologies of selected verses from Guru Granth Sahib. A popular book in this category is *Sankat Mochan*, or “the saviour from troubles”, a total collection of 108 quoted verses from the Sikh scripture. Today there exist various versions of *Sankat Mochan* in both Devanagari and Gurmukhi script which have been compiled by different religious scholars, some of whom claim to have been blessed with the knowledge from descendants of disciples to the Sikh Gurus.<sup>445</sup> It would be correct to say that *Sankat Mochan* constitute a sub-genre of ritual handbooks that aims to provide knowledge of the range and methods of using *gurbani* in social life. In slightly different ways the editions instruct readers on which verse is to be recited in which social context to fulfil particular human needs or solve difficulties. In the introduction the compiler may offer general advice to accomplish a recitation successfully. In one edition the devout reciter is instructed to take a bath in *amritvela*, do the daily readings of *panj banian* with punctuality, and in the evening read *Rahiras Sahib* and *Kirtan Sohila* before going to sleep. Prior to a daily reading of the selected verse(s) from *Sankat Mochan*, the reciter should create a seat at a “pure” (*pavitra*) place, either at the bank of a river or a pool, and in solitude be seated facing the sun. The reciter is advised to use a white woolen rosary, light incense, and before commencing the reading with a concentrated mind repeat the *mulmantra* five times and read the *Ardas* at the “feet of the respected Satguru”, as one edition stipulates.<sup>446</sup> According to this book, even non-*Amritdhari* Sikhs should thus commit to a personal discipline similar to the Khalsa standards for the period they undertake recitations and deliberately create a pure and

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<sup>445</sup> For instance, in one edition of *Sankat Mochan* the compiler Giani Gurcharan Singh claims that the selection of hymns was made by a person in lineage of Baba Buddha, the first *granthi* of Harimandir Sahib who ritually invested the Sikh Gurus to the office. The compiler, and/or the person selecting *gurbani* hymns for ritual use, has been blessed with divine knowledge and is therefore authorized to work as an instructive agent to others. The appeal to tradition, in this case a relationship with contemporary disciples of the Sikh Gurus, sometimes legitimizes this authority.

<sup>446</sup> *Sankat Mochan Shabad*, Giani Gurcharan Singh, p. 4.

sacred space for the contemplative recitation. Under each of the 108 *gurbani* hymns quoted in *Sankat Mochan* the compilers then clarify for which purpose the individual verse will suit and specify the ritual procedure, usually by deciding how many times each hymn is to be recited consecutively for a fixed time period. One version of *Sankat Mochan* compiled by Gurcharan Singh, for instance, instructs the readers to pick out the hymn which agrees with the experienced trouble or need, and recite it from beginning to end 108 times daily for forty days.<sup>447</sup> Another edition by Narain Singh is more circumstantial, advising recitation periods ranging between 21 to 51 days, during which the chosen hymn should be recited from 51 to 5000 times.<sup>448</sup> As a ritual manual, *Sankat Mochan* gives an idea of the powers and effects Sikhs may ascribe to single verses of Guru Granth Sahib and the most diversified spiritual and mundane motives that can induce them to conduct recitations of *gurbani* – all from seeking salvation and truth to resolve court cases, domestic disputes or meet a lover.

In Varanasi, several of my interviewees used to commit themselves to disciplined recitations whenever they met adversities or experienced disorders in social life. For those not following Khalsa regulations, this commitment implicated daily baths and abstinence from meat and intoxicants. Some would sleep on the ground and not visit other people's houses for as long as the recitation was going. The austerities would have a purifying effect on their body and mind, and generated internal powers to achieve the desired goals. Every day during a recitation period they would light an oil lamp near their chosen seat and keep a pot with water beside it. After the reading was completed they sprinkled the water in the house and onto family members, and if the recitation was undertaken to seek remedy for a sick person they washed the sufferer with the nectar-water. To keep the two elements with purifying potential – fire and water – is a part of the performance and may represent the spiritual refinement achieved by these devotional practices. In this context, however, the water is believed to be nectar-water permeated with the transformative agency of *gurbani* and thereby possesses power to purify and benefit the reciter and sufferer in a tangible manner.

Besides *Sankat Mochan*, some will daily repeat the entire *Sukhmani Sahib* and *Chaupai Sahib* five or seven times, or recourse to the verses recorded in *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib*, or "the destroyer of suffering," which is another anthology comprising thirty-four different *gurbani* stanzas. These readings are systematized according to an auspicious numerical value of individual choice, usually repeated daily for an odd number of times during an odd number of days, since even numbers are considered inauspicious. A more popular method for regular readings is to undertake the discipline of a *chilla*, meaning "forty", and which is the aggregate of recitations for a total period of forty days.<sup>449</sup> In Punjabi folklore, as well as other religious and musical traditions in

<sup>447</sup> *Sankat Mochan Shabad*, Giani Gurcharan Singh.

<sup>448</sup> *Sankat Mochan Shabad*, Giani Narain Singh.

<sup>449</sup> The term *chilla* derives from the Persian word for number forty (*chelle*). The practice of *chilla* is apparently a heritage of Persian Sufi orders in which a forty day period of seclusion and ascetism was the initiation rite. In the Punjab there are several places, such as Sirsa and Tilla Jogian,

India, the notion of *chilla* denotes an intensive spiritual retreat for a forty-day period during which a devout person will stay isolated from the outer world to be fully dedicated to meditation and austere practices, sometimes accompanied with food restrictions and rules for body postures.<sup>450</sup> Forty days is widely recognized as an auspicious period that indicates the change from one stage to another. To complete solitary practices for this long duration is perceived as a test in faith and courage that has the potential of conferring blessings and supernatural knowledge, even transforming the undertaker's spiritual and social status. A similar cultural conviction of regularity and commitment seems to underlie the Sikh practice of conducting recitations for forty days. It is a period of complete dedication to *gurbani*, believed to preserve the spiritual power (*siddhi*) of the doer and generate favorable results.<sup>451</sup>

In these settings the single *gurbani* verse or hymn is repeated as a sacred formula, which in combination with the disciplined life-style generates positive effects. The practice resembles the use of mantras and sacred spells found in so many other cultural contexts and which often emanates from a belief that redundant and accumulative repetitions of sacred words work as keys to unlock hidden meanings and produce supernatural powers. Unlike scholarly propositions that sacred speech are unintelligible sounds devoid of semantic meanings or loose prepositional forces in the process of formalization,<sup>452</sup> the *gurbani* verses selected for regimented recitations typically display a strong semantic relationship with the declared purposes for which they are used. For example, a composition in which Guru Arjan portrays the marriage between human and God by the image of a lovesick and yearning woman who finally unites with her beloved at his bed can be recited by a woman a number of times to make her husband, stationed in a foreign country, return home.<sup>453</sup> The allegory or theme elaborated in the text highlights a semantic similarity with the purpose or reason for which the verse can be recited in the social world. If the Gurus dressed their devotion and praises to God in metaphors within Guru Granth Sahib, then the

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which mark out the spaces (*chilla-hane*) at which Guru Nanak is said to have undertaken a *chilla* of mediation and seclusion.

<sup>450</sup> In classical and regional musical traditions in India (like the *Punjab gharana*), a *chilla* is a preparatory stage in the musical training of performers. For forty days in a row the trainee performer will play an instrument as a test of inner force and dedication. If the novice stands the test, the intensive musical and spiritual practice of a *chilla* is believed to give a special flavor to his or her future performances and will transform him to a master of the art. A Sikh *ragi* performer who has undergone this period will sometimes be given the honorific title "sant" to indicate his spiritual commitment and status.

<sup>451</sup> In addition, the word *chilla* signifies the discipline to attend the gurdwara to present prayer and light a candle for forty days in a row and a period of seclusion for the mother after childbirth (See Chapter 4).

<sup>452</sup> The former position has been propounded by Staal (1979a) and the latter by Bloch (1989).

<sup>453</sup> The ritual instructions for the exemplified verse (GGS: 384) is found in *Sankat Mochan* compiled by Giani Narain Singh.

devotional practice of reciting *gurbani* transforms these metaphors into operative verbal agents outside the text.<sup>454</sup>

Depending upon individual beliefs, local Sikhs often take up different and sometimes conflicting stances towards the “magical” uses of verses derived from Guru Granth Sahib. An elderly Sikh woman strongly propounded that any line in the Sikh scripture can become a powerful mantra for various problems or purposes in everyday life. As opposed to this, a younger expounder (*kathakar*), trained at a Sikh educational institution in the Punjab, passed strong strictures on the existing “ritualism” that Sikhs in Varanasi observed due to influences by the dominant Hindu environment. In his view, *Sankat Mochan* and other handbooks prescribing ritualistic uses of *gurbani* were published only to make profit from people’s superstitions and led them astray from the true teaching of *simran* – the interior remembrance of the divine. A middle position between the two conflicting views regards the commitment to recitation periods as a type of disciplined worship and an opportunity for the individual devotee to express wishes to God and give return gifts in terms of time, efforts, and dedication.

The reasoning is based on a paradigmatic principle of exchange between humans and the divine: people humbly solicit and “give away” one thing in order to be favored something else by God. What is given away in this context is a form of *tapashya*, a severe austerity practice or “sacrifice” by temporarily submitting oneself to a disciplined life-style and recitations systematized after auspicious numbers. The insistence on keeping an oil-lamp burning beside the seat of recitation seems to index the practice carried out, which has potential of removing or “burning off” karma. From a Sikh point of view, however, only God knows the workings of karmic cause and effect. Whether the result of a human “sacrifice” will prove fruitful or not always depends upon the divine will and grace bestowed upon humans. Ultimately it is God alone who will render good effects and power to words uttered by humans. But the disciplinary recitation of *gurbani* becomes the means to establish a devotional link with the divine, and redundancy is the device to convey a message properly. “If I recite a *shabad* for forty days God will listen to my wishes at least once,” an elderly Sikh woman said. In order to be heard and reciprocated one has to complete the sacred verses correctly a noticeable number of times with full concentration. Another woman stressed that repetitive patterns were only created to anticipate human errors of mispronunciation and inattentiveness in readings: “Therefore it is written that you should *path* five times, and so on, because at least your mind will be present in one *path*. At least one *path* will be completed.”

Another type of numerical recitation system, practiced among local women in particular, is to share and distribute a large number of recitations of one selected hymn, such as 51, 108 or more, among each other. The women get together and calculate how many recitations need to be completed over a selected time period for (or without) a particular cause. Each of them will then tell how many readings they are

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<sup>454</sup> For a fuller discussion on semantic links between text and action, see Chapter 5.

able to complete and make a promise to individually recite the chosen composition a fixed number of times daily at the house. If 108 readings of *Japji Sahib* are required, for example, it will take twelve women to read the text nine times each. At the end, the women will decide a date when they gather in the gurdwara and let the *granthi* perform an *Ardas* for all accumulated recitations. No specific Punjabi word is used for this type of calculated recitations, even if the language of the banking and business world lies near at hand. An English-speaking interlocutor, a businesswoman herself, referred to it as “bank balancing” recitations, which in her opinion was the ideal method to make women take interest in *gurbani* and simultaneously economize their time at disposal. One composition frequently used for these types of recitations, and which here deserves special attention, is Guru Arjan’s beloved poem *Sukhmani Sahib*.

### THE PRECIOUS JEWEL OF PEACE

Of all compositions drawn from Guru Granth Sahib and recited in liturgies and ceremonies, *Sukhmani Sahib* is undoubtedly one of the most popular in the Sikh community today. The lengthy poem is divided into twenty-four parts called *asthapadi*, each of which comprises an introductory couplet (*shalok*), followed by a set of eight stanzas. Local tales often narrate how Guru Arjan composed *Sukhmani Sahib* at Amritsar on the request of the congregation, pleading for a divine hymn that could pacify the restless mind and heart of humans. The Guru therefore gave them the precious gift of *Sukhmani* – “the jewel of *sukh*”. In common parlance the compound of the two words *sukh* and *mani* is often translated into “the peace-giving jewel” (*sujh den vali mani*), or the gem which provides happiness and peace of mind/heart.<sup>455</sup> Why *Sukhmani Sahib* has gained popularity is said to be due to the beauty of its expressions and thoughts, praising the splendour of the divine name as the means towards liberation, and the comprehensible language of the text. If the semantic content and language of other *gurbani* texts, such as *Chaupai Sahib* and other compositions attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, are deemed linguistically challenging, ordinary people can easily read, understand and enjoy the epigrammatic style of *Sukhmani Sahib*. Each of the almost 2000 lines of the composition is believed to store powerful meanings, and individual *asthapadis* evoke stories about the blissful result from reading the verses.<sup>456</sup>

<sup>455</sup> For different interpretations of the term *Sukhmani*, consult Guinness 1980.

<sup>456</sup> One man, for instance, told the following story related to the first *asthapadi* of *Sukhmani Sahib*: “There was a beggar who went to Guru ji and complained about his poverty. The Guru ji said, “There are two words, just two words, *prabh ke simran* [the remembrance of God], if you recite these you will get all you that you can wish for. The beggar agreed and he started to recite the two words. After this, another man came to Guru ji and said, “Let me take this beggar to my fields in Punjab.” The beggar got a job. A second time he went back to Guru ji and said, “You have given me all this, but now tell me what to do. I want children.” Again Guru ji told him to recite these two words. The man got children. A third time the man went to Guru ji and said, “Now I got all things in life. I got children and the landowner gave me his fields. I do not want anything else but to be closer to you. I want to reach you.” For the third time Guru ji told him to

In its entirety the text is regarded to contain advices and spiritual instructions (*up-desh*) applicable to everyday life. People in general say that recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* will bestow peace (*sukh*) and remove all sadness (*dukh*). A 19-year old woman exemplified:

When you are doing a reading of *Sukhmani Sahib* properly *dukh* goes very far away. You will get a lot of peace in your mind. The rain of *sukh* comes over you. *Sukhmani Sahib* is not only [performed] for one reason. By reading it you will get all kinds of *sukh*. The *dukh* gets far away.

*Sukhmani Sahib* is believed to alleviate all sorts of suffering in life, such as sadness, pain, grief, fear, and anxiety. Even karmic results of committed sins and the punishments of Yama – the Messenger of Death – will escape the person who engages in *Sukhmani Sahib*. Just as you have to clean a dirty mirror in order to see your true self, in the same way a reading of *Sukhmani Sahib* purges your body and mind, an elderly Sikh man paralleled. He likened the words in *Sukhmani Sahib* to “soap” for internal remedy. To accomplish this cleansing a reading has to be performed with “proper” motives, free from greediness and all types of evils (*vikar*).

When both specialists and the laity paid attention to the purging functions of the text they quite often submitted to a bodily and numerical rationale: every hour a person takes 1000 breaths (*sans*), which in total adds up to 24000 breaths per day and night. As *Sukhmani Sahib* consists of twenty-four *ashtapadi* one single reading of the texts, preferably in the morning, will purify the human breath and mind for a whole period of twenty-four hours. More circumstantial accounts specify the number of words or characters of the text to 24000.<sup>457</sup> The main point of these calculations is to verify the power of each spelling in *Sukhmani Sahib* and that recitations of the text actually will have spiritual and physical effects on the reader.<sup>458</sup>

Given this power, recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* appear in a large number of ritual contexts. In the daily liturgy of the gurdwara it is the first composition to be

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recite these two words, *prabh ke simran*, and this is the meaning of *Sukhmani Sahib*. These two words are in the first *ashtapadi*. Each line of *Sukhmani Sahib* has a meaning.”

<sup>457</sup> As some interlocutors asserted, the relationship between *Sukhmani Sahib* recitations and human breathing was established already in the creation of the text. At the time when Guru Arjan was writing *Sukhmani Sahib* his wife Ganga asked for a valuable necklace. Guru Arjan replied that when this composition was ready it would become her necklace that is made by the breaths of all who will read it. Human breaths, purified by *gurbani*, would be her jewels. The elderly woman who told this story attempted to confirm the sophisticate combination of form and content in the text and the Guru’s original intention behind its reading.

<sup>458</sup> According to a local *granthi*, people who read *Sukhmani Sahib* with regularity and a pure heart will get a shining look on their face. When community members ask for his help in troublesome times he usually exhorts them to read *Sukhmani Sahib* regularly over a fixed period, either in solitude or in company with others.

recited after the Guru Granth Sahib has been formally installed. Individual Sikhs will start their day by reciting *Sukhmani Sahib* in addition to the prescribed *nitnem*, or incorporate readings in their daily domestic duties or at work. An elderly man who ran a furniture store in the busy shopping streets of Varanasi had established a routine of reading parts of *Sukhmani Sahib* between visits from customers to complete at least two to three readings within a working day. He used to sit at the office desk reading from a *gutka*, reverentially placed on velvet cloth. As he alleged, through the daily business activities he earned the livelihood in this life, but readings of *Sukhmani Sahib* were to support him in the life after. When a relative or a friend becomes seriously ill individuals make a promise to recite the text either five or twenty-one times daily for a period of forty days. While some would argue that *Sukhmani Sahib* has the capacity to grant peace to the troubled soul, even if recoveries are always dependent upon the divine will, others will attribute the text with healing powers.<sup>459</sup> Readings are also believed to succor a person at the time of death. In colloquial speech a person will be granted a “good death” if he or she dies while reciting *Sukhmani Sahib*. When life is drawing to an end old people will therefore retreat to recitations, just as family members recite the composition beside the dying.

#### FEMALE READING CLUBS

Collective recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* have become intimately associated with women, even regarded as a female activity. Men are certainly not prevented from attending these ritualized readings of the text, but it is women who organize and constitute the bulk of participants. In Varanasi Sikh women have arranged several clubs and societies of various degrees of formality for weekly or monthly recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib*. In addition, women occasionally set up these performances in private houses for specific purposes related to Sikh festivals, ceremonies, or just for their own enjoyment. Community members residing in the vicinity of Gurubagh Gurdwara have organized a club called *Istri Sadhsang Samuday*, “The Association of Female Holy Company”, only for the purpose of reciting *Sukhmani Sahib*. At the time of my fieldwork, the members gathered in the gurdwara every Wednesday at 4 pm to complete a full reading of the composition. Normally these programs would extend over little more than an hour and a half, and attracted about thirty women of all ages. Correspondingly, about ten to fifteen Sikh women who lived nearby Nichibagh met in the gurdwara or at a private house for Thursday recitations. In the small colony gurdwara of Ashok Nagar women used to organize recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* every Monday at 6 am and afterwards serve tea, snacks and sweetened rice to all participants. Sikh women belonging to different neighborhoods (*mohallas*) of the city also arranged local clubs for readings of *Sukhmani Sahib*.

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<sup>459</sup> The female Sikh healer (*ojha*) in Varanasi, Mata Narinder Kaur, used to prescribe a *chilla*, a daily reading for forty days of *Sukhmani Sahib* to exorcise bad spirits and other mental and physical problems (See Chapter 4).

Between the year of 1999 and 2001 I got to know of at least four regular clubs in the local areas of Cotton Mill, Anant Colony, Shish Mahal Colony and Nadeshwar respectively. In Cotton Mill, for instance, the women assembled every Thursday to recite *Sukhmani Sahib* between 4 pm and 6 pm. In Shish Mahal Colony a group of eight Sikh women took turns at arranging the program on a monthly basis. A popular kind of gathering for *Sukhmani Sahib* readings is the so-called “kitty-party” arranged among friends usually in the afternoon on the day of *sangrand*, the first day of the solar Vikrami month. As one woman commented, “We do not play cards or games in these kitty parties, but instead do readings of *Sukhmani Sahib*.” Prior to the party the women collect money from all club members and on the day of the meeting draw lots as to who will be awarded the money and organize the next party. As it is expected from the winning hostess to serve refreshments to all participants the lottery system is a method to organize recitations parties like a Dutch treat.



*Sukhmani Sahib* recitations

In connection with Sikh ceremonies women also put together several occasional recitations clubs with friends and relatives. For forty days before the commemoration of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom in the hot month of *Jeth* (June) a group of local women did daily individual or collective readings of the text. At the time of the Hindu celebrations of Krishna’s birthday (*Krishna Janamashtami*) in the month of *Bhadron* (August/September) some women would combine the customary fast (*vrat*) with a gathering for *Sukhmani Sahib* reading in line with Sikh praxis. After the event of birth and death it is customary to invite all women in the circle of acquaintances for jointly recitations. On the fortieth day after a delivery, for instance, a female reading club will be summoned to the family house where the mother and baby are ritually purified and will enter public life. Sometimes collective recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* may even substitute the costly and strenuous unbroken reading of *Guru Granth Sahib*.



(*Akhand path*), which is to be performed within the structure of most life-cycle ceremonies. Female interlocutors explained that 51 recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* will produce the same effect and results as one unbroken reading of the Sikh scripture. Consequently, if a poor family cannot afford the forty-eight-hours long reading the women get together and perform *Sukhmani Sahib* for at least fifty-one times.

#### METHODS OF PERFORMING

In Varanasi I mainly observed three methods by which female groups recite *Sukhmani Sahib*. The first style bears strong resemblance to an ordinary narration, according to which one or two women simply read the full text without any break to a listening audience. The second and more popular method is employed when a large number of recitations are required, such as 51, 101 or more, for a specific cause. The women calculate how many times they have to perform the compositions and then put a corresponding number of almonds into a bowl in order to keep count of the completed readings. Seated on the floor in rows with small *gutkas*, all participants recite *Sukhmani Sahib* separately for as many times as possible within a set time limit and according to individual pace. For each concluded reading the women take out one almond from the bowl and again start to recite the text from the beginning. While some women choose to perform this recitation more silently, others will pronounce the words in a loud-voiced manner. Quite often these gatherings create a polyphonic buzz of female voices.

A third method of reading *Sukhmani Sahib* is more univocal and melodious in character. Forming a circle on the floor, the women take turns at leading the others throughout the twenty-four *ashtapadis*. Using a melody based on three descending notes the leader chants the first line of each couplet, after which the other women respond by vocalizing the second line in unison. When the recitation reaches the last

couplet of an *asthapadi* they will sing the two ending lines in chorus and the following *shalok*, which preludes the subsequent *ashtapadi*. The heading of "*asthapadi*" is enounced in unison before the woman next in turn immediately carries on leading the others through the following forty couplets. The ending couplet of *Ashtapadi* 24: 6 and the whole content of *Asthapadi* 24: 7 – 8 are usually sung and accompanied with musical instruments. The very

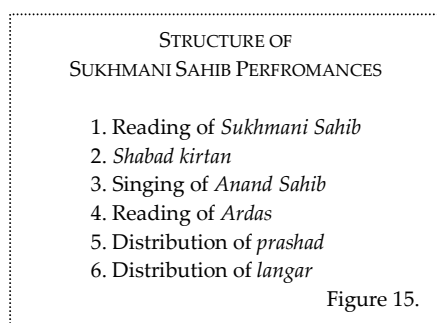


Figure 15.

last couplet of *Sukhmani Sahib* may be repeated up to two or three times.<sup>460</sup> When the last word of the poem is uttered, all the women take their *gutkas* to the foreheads in a mark of respect.

<sup>460</sup> Another and more arduous style of reciting *Sukhmani Sahib* is to interpolate the last couplet twenty-four times after each *ashtapadi*.

Typically a collective performance of *Sukhmani Sahib* comprises key worship acts that occur in other Sikh ceremonies (See Figure 15). After the actual reading of the text, there will be a short session of devotional music (*shabad kirtan*). The vocal content of the songs may consist of selected verses from the text, such as the first couplet of *Asthapadi* 19 or the closing lines of *Ashtapadi* 24. After this, the women will sing the first five and the fortieth verse of the hymn *Anand Sahib* and read the *Ardas*. In the recitation events I took part in, the oldest member of the group would read the prayer while other participants stood in a semicircle around a framed picture of Guru Nanak in the living room of the house. At the very end, the hostess would distribute sweets and food to all.

The strong association of women with *Sukhmani Sahib* readings has imparted local women a significant role in the religious life of the whole community. Both women and men ascribe female recitations the power to purify humans and their social space, alleviate sufferings, and even grant a better position in the next life. Besides the spiritual gains and pleasure of reciting the text, the women themselves say that the religious clubs and parties provide a break from everyday routines and make an occasion to socialize and engage in spiritual pursuits with friends. For middle class women readings of *Sukhmani Sahib* have become socially sanctioned events that will carry them far from the limited environment of the household and access to new roles in public spaces. Since the end of the 1990s a team of four middle-aged women in Varanasi have assumed responsibility for the daily recitation of the text in Gurubagh Gurdwara. Except for two months in the cold season, the female group goes daily to the gurdwara at 4 am to jointly read the composition seated beside the throne of Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>461</sup> When the women gave the reasons for taking charge of a public performance conventionally assigned to male performers they appealed to the tradition of female recitations and stated purely spiritual motives for relocating their individual daily readings to a public domain. In this case the local *granthi* was sympathetic to their suggestion and agreed to transfer his duty to the female group, which now performs *Sukhmani Sahib* – “The Jewel of Peace” – for the whole Sikh congregation at Varanasi.

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<sup>461</sup> During the two months break in the cold season the women participate in morning processions (*prabhatferi*) to commemorate the birth of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.

## RECITING THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

Since the Guru Granth Sahib is considered to constitute a complete unit of the Gurus' teaching, the scripture is also recited from beginning to end. Separate hymns derived from the Guru Granth Sahib are frequently referred to as "branches" or "body parts" of the Guru in *gurbani*, but to engage in recitations of the the total accumulation of knowledge in the scripture bound in one volume is to bring out the entirety of the Guru dwelling within the pages. Local Sikhs are therefore engaged in various types of complete recitations of the whole Guru Granth Sahib of one kind or another. The formalized recitations that are widely practiced among Sikhs in Varanasi is *Khulla path*, or "open recitation", in which the reader will divide the scripture into segments according to their own choosing and cover a fixed number of pages in daily installments. The other method to proceed through the Guru Granth Sahib is *Akhand path*, or "unbroken recitation", when a team of reciters will read the entire scripture without any break during a forty-eight-hour period. The unbroken recitation is frequently assigned to professional reciters and occurs in public ceremonies in the gurdwara or at the house, whereas broken recitation has become a popular lay-practice that Sikhs will do individually or together with family members.

The enactment of these formalized recitations always renders the physical presence and installation of Guru Granth Sahib necessary. *Khulla path*, the easier and broken recitation, can be carried out from a *sanchi*, the scripture divided into two or more parts, if an individual or family lack means to facilitate a scriptural throne. The *sanchi* will then be placed on a wooden stand to be in a higher position than the reciter, and, after readings, is wrapped in a decorative bag and kept on an upper shelf at the house. The harder recitation of *Akhand path*, on the other hand, always demands a scripture in one volume. In the two gurdwaras of Varanasi, the rooms of *sachkhand*, or the "abode of truth", on the second floor are reserved spaces only for performances of *Akhand path*. The Guru Granth Sahib will be temporarily installed and seated on a dais or a roofed palanquin covered with robes and cushions. The reciter always sits on the ground in a lower position while reading, often with a microphone on the side since the unbroken *Akhand path* is broadcast through loudspeakers in between the morning and evening liturgy. In front of Guru Granth Sahib large sheets of cotton are spread out for visitors who want to pay respect to the Guru and sit down for a while to listen to quoted *gurbani*.

### KHULLA PATH – THE BROKEN READING

*Khulla path*, or "open recitation", is complete recitation of Guru Granth Sahib from beginning to end that is broken and divided up into sequences during an optional space of time. Synonyms frequently used for this recitation are *Sadharan path* [Punjabi] or "simple recitation", and *Sahaj path* [Sanskrit], "easy recitation", which indicates that this type of reading can be performed by anyone who has a good command of the Gurmukhi script. A common practice among lay Sikhs is to make a promise to complete the broken recitation before a fixed date in the future and every day recite

selected portions of text at the house or in the gurdwara. Many will integrate the broken recitation in the morning liturgy and share it between other family members of the household. The devout reciters may proceed through the text as they like – some days reading more and other days less – but ideally complete the *path* within a planned time period.

Since *Khulla path* is sequenced according to individual choosing it does not require the service of professional reciters, although reciters from the gurdwara or elsewhere are often invited to wealthier families to look after the *Prakash* and *Sukhasan* ceremonies to Guru Granth Sahib and carry out parts of the readings at their houses. In one neighborhood three Sikh families engaged a paid reciter from Gurubagh Gurdwara for monthly *Khulla* recitations all the year round. He would answer for the ceremonial opening and conclusion of the readings, which were neatly adjusted to the first day of each solar month (*sangrand*) or memorial days of deceased family members. In between these dates he would go from house to house on a daily basis, at each place performing a few hours of recitals on behalf of the family or share a recitation with the mother of house.<sup>462</sup>

To lay people *Khulla path* provides a highly appreciated means of access to the semantic inner of Guru Granth Sahib. Since the method allowed people to adjust a recitation of the scripture according to individual reading ability and pace, my interlocutors experienced they could appreciate and understand the Guru's teaching in a better way, although perfect comprehension can only be appropriated by a divine kindness and grace. An elderly man said:

You are going through the whole Guru Granth Sahib ji. Some days when you are reading you do not really understand the meaning. But other days you find really interesting things and you become very devotional. It depends on the kindness (*kripa*) of Guru Maharaj. Sometimes you are just struck by the words.

A common motive for undertaking a *Khulla path* is to obtain familiarity with the text and develop the ability to conduct scriptural readings. Persons who will advance to professional reciters often start training enunciation and intonation techniques with the easier recitation, sometimes under supervision of a senior elocutionist. In an *Ardas* that will be presented subsequent to each reading the novice begs God forgiveness for all faults and mispronunciations committed, and promises to not repeat mistakes. Even though *Khulla path* allows for intellectual reflections on the content and form of Guru Granth Sahib, the actual reading is still to be conducted in a syntagmatic order, from beginning to end, without any major halts or leaving out a single word of the text.

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<sup>462</sup> Like the performance of *Akhand path*, families may sponsor a monthly *Khulla path* solely carried out by a paid reciter and only participate in the ceremonial conclusion (*bhog*).

The Sikhs have developed various systems of dividing Guru Granth Sahib for the sequential recitations of *Khulla path*. A common approach is to complete a more or less fixed number of pages every day, such as fifty or sixty pages, or to proceed through the text by reading a selected number of hymns or sections daily. For example, an elderly shopkeeper who kept a gurdwara at his house began his day by reciting thirty to fifty pages from the scripture between 7.30 and 9.30 in the morning. Each day after the *Prakash* ceremony he would take the *Hukam* and read the *Ardas* before starting the recitation. His *Khulla path* would take a month to complete and therefore he adjusted the ceremonial beginning and end of the recitation to the day of *sangrand*. Others would devote a fixed amount of time, all from a couple of minutes to two hours, to the recitation as a part of the daily morning worship. A younger man in his twenties had reached page 151 in Guru Granth Sahib at the time of our conversation and intended to complete his *Khulla path* within nine months. Another man of the same age devoted himself to recitations within more indefinite temporal boundaries, however, emphasized that he always celebrated the ceremonial conclusion (*bhog*) together with his family and started another recitation on the same day.

Another popular method of performing *Khulla path* is to complete the recitation within a fixed time period, such as seven days, eleven days, a month, three months, six months, nine months, a year or more. The 1430 pages of Guru Granth Sahib will then be mathematically divided by the number of days deposited for a recitation, which will be named after the chosen time-frame. If the broken reading is to be a *saptahak path*, or “weekly recitation” concluded within the span of seven days the reader must accomplish approximately 204 pages per day.<sup>463</sup> In case a devotee is to undertake a *Barsi path*, or a “yearly recitation” then at least 4 pages a day must be recited. These calculations, however, serve more as guiding principles to schedule broken recitations and the performer is free to read a few pages more or less according to convenience. Preferably the reading should reach the end of Guru Granth Sahib and be completed within the selected time frame for two reasons: firstly, to undertake a *Khulla path* is to submit oneself to the discipline of daily readings from Guru Granth Sahib, often for a specific purpose or desired end. Many consider the regularity crucial, since it is not only to pledge oneself to accomplish a recitation but also involves a promise to God that one will carry out this within a given time period as a devotional act of thanksgiving or to seek divine blessings. Secondly, the final conclusion (*samapati*) of a recitation is an auspicious event and should fall on the specific day for which the reading has been undertaken. Several Sikh women in Varanasi, for instance, engage in year-long *Khulla* recitations for the prosperity and long life of their husbands and children, and neatly adjusted the conclusion to their birthdays. When the recitation is conducted for protection of a family member who will embark on a journey the end should always occur before the planned departure. Among my interlocutors a monthly *Khulla path* was more widely practiced, often in the form of a

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<sup>463</sup> Some people also do a double *Saptahak path*, one after another, for fourteen days, which is called a “fortnight recitation” (*Pandrahi path*).

memorial service to celebrate departed family members and ancestors. Throughout the year either the birth or death day of the deceased would set the temporal frame of these broken recitations. In one middle-class family the woman of the house kept a tradition of starting and ending an unbroken *path* on day 18 of each month to commemorate her father-in-law who expired on August 18. Between 8.30 and 9.30 in the morning on that date she invited the immediate family to enjoy the final reading (*samapati*) of Guru Granth Sahib. In a sparsely furnished room on the second floor, only reserved for these performances, she spread out white sheets on the floor so that all guests would be seated facing the scripture. On these occasions she arranged a small session of devotional singing (*kirtan*) before a new recitation began and afterwards served visitors sweets and food. Other families would adjust *Khulla path* at the house to auspicious dates in the calendar, like *sangrand* or the full moon day (*puranmashi*).<sup>464</sup>

Since *Khulla path* is a broken recitation segmented over longer periods and divided up between family members, it is momentous to note down the completed pages after each day's reading. As a general rule bookmarks or notes in the folio are to be avoided. Instead, the reciter will keep a small diary at the side of the scripture. In one large joint family, hosting a spaciouly gurdwara in the upper storey of their house, the man and wife shared a *Khulla path* between themselves. The woman used to read about 40 pages on spare times, while her trading husband completed 4 to 5 pages before or after his work. In order to keep count of how many pages they completed individually, and on which page to start recitals in the morning, they entered all reading activities in a small journal. "If I have completed a reading up to page 50, then my Sardar ji will continue on page 51", the woman said. Accountancies like this are held significant for one reason: if a reciter forgets how many pages have been completed or leave out passages the recitation is considered *khandit*, in other words "destroyed" or "disqualified", and needs to be started over again from the beginning.

#### AKHAND PATH – THE UNBROKEN READING

The complete and unbroken recitation of the Sikh scripture Guru Granth Sahib, *Akhand path*, is probably one of the more popular worship-forms among the Sikhs worldwide today. As the name indicates, the recitation of the scripture's 1430 pages should be unbroken (*akhand*) and performed within forty-eight hours. A general opinion among Sikhs suggests that the practice of unbroken readings originates from the turbulent situation in the eighteenth century when Sikhs were living scattered in different places and fought against the Mogul rulers. As Sikhs were forced to move repeatedly, carrying a limited number of manuscripts, they developed a custom of reciting Guru Granth Sahib jointly without intermissions.

In Varanasi, *Akhand path* is indubitably the reading considered most favourable and conformable to the busy working life of community members. During my field-

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<sup>464</sup> A recitation scheduled between two full moons will consequently be called "full moon recitation" (*Puranmashi path*).

work in Varanasi I quickly lost count of the number of *Akhand path* performed in the gurdwaras and private homes. It would be no exaggeration to state that the community members arrange far more than a hundred recitations each year. As the following chapters will illustrate, *Akhand path* makes a significant part of all life-cycle ceremonies and marks events of beginning and transfer: the opening of a new shop, moving into a new house or before setting out on a journey. It is a general belief that a completion of an *Akhand path* will bestow divine protection, alleviate troubles, and rectify state of affairs that have been disturbed. After a death family members will not arrange any happy event at the house, such as marriage, before *Akhand path* has been completed three or more months subsequent to the death day. The performance is said to start “good things” in life and ensure blessings to the family and the house. People arrange the recitation for those who are seriously ill or to prevent afflictions from entering the house. Many families commemorate their grandparents or ancestors by annually sponsoring an *Akhand path* on the anniversary of their birth or death. To celebrate birthdays of the Sikh Gurus the gurdwara usually organize a double chain of recitations (*Akhand path ki larhi*), forty days before the celebrations of Guru Nanak’s birthday in October/November and thirty days prior to Guru Gobind Singh’s birthday in January. In the room of *sachkhand* two unbroken recitations will be staged parallel and succeeded by two new recitations without any break. Since the gurdwara and community members organize *Akhand path* on the eve of almost every festival it is hard to find a gap in the calendar when a recitation is not commenced.

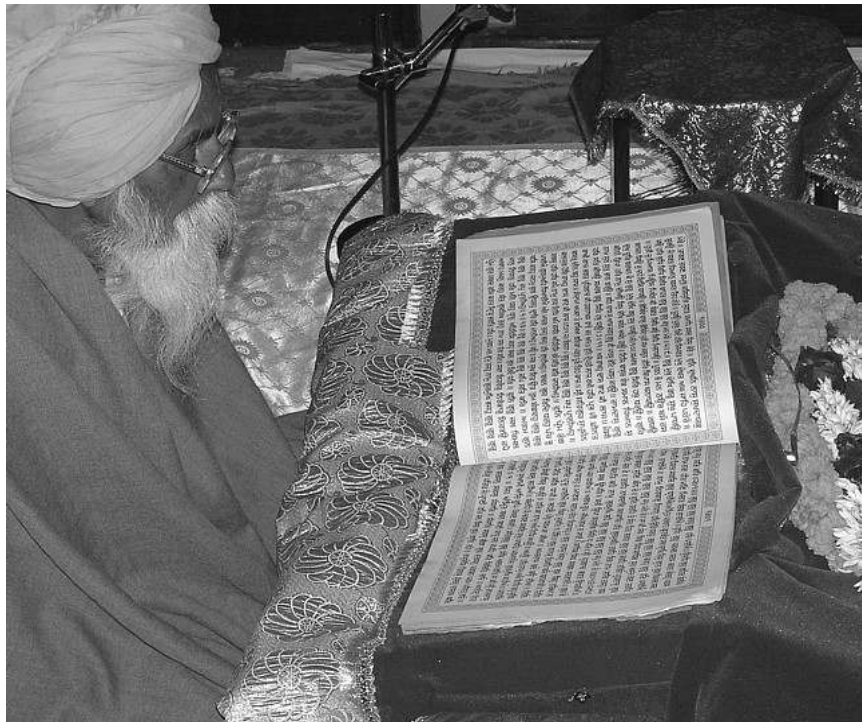
Many of my interlocutors referred to *Akhand path* as the “greatest worship” (*maha puja*), and some even regarded it as an equivalent of the grand horse sacrifice (*ashvamedh yajna*) in Vedic times. A 45-year old man, for instance, expressed the significance of *Akhand path* in the following way:

*Akhand path* has the same value as a horse sacrifice. Raja Dasrat performed this sacrifice. Ram also performed it, and his sons, Lav and Kush, caught the horse, which they used for the sacrifice. The same virtues are achieved if you arrange an *Akhand path*. For whichever wish you set up an *Akhand path*, the wish will always come true. I have never seen a wish that was not fulfilled by *Akhand path*.

The association of the unbroken recitation of Guru Granth Sahib with the Vedic ritual is an attempt to give it an ultimate status. Another interlocutor employed the parable of train journeys when elucidating the popularity of *Akhand path*: in the modern age people prefer to travel by fast express trains rather than the ordinary trains with delays and changes. Hinging on more cosmogonic beliefs the *granthi* in one of the gurdwaras explained that people are under the sway of the degenerated Dark Age (*kaliyug*) when their lives are getting shorter in comparison with generations in the beginning of the creation. By tradition families should arrange a broken reading of Guru Granth Sahib on the tenth or twelfth day following the death of a family member, but instead they set up an unbroken reading already on the day following the

cremation. As he reasoned, when people are under the influence of *kaliyug* the compressed reading can substitute time-consuming rituals.

The popularity of *Akhand path* is given many explanations, just as people may ascribe a kaleidoscope of meanings to the recitation. The cover-to-cover reading of the whole Guru Granth Sahib without any break indicates completeness and manifests the total accumulation of *gurbani* within a set time and space. As Chapter 5 will analyze the stipulated performance of *Akhand path* possesses the quality of being apprehensible to a number of verbally articulated motives and reasons of both secular and religious nature. There is no single all-embracing meaning that can be traced to the performance, but Sikhs may attribute the recitation with a variety of meanings, motives and functions.



A local *pathi* performs *Akhand path*

The demands on everyday life, in combination with the required linguistic and liturgical knowledge for conducting *Akhand path* in an accurate manner make two important reasons as to why individuals and families hand over the actual performance to the service of professional reciters (*pathi*). Reciting the complete scripture uninterrupted for two days and nights requires a reading team of between four to six *pathis* who are fluent in Gurmukhi and can read at a rapid pace without mispronouncing or omitting a single word. As the system of *Akhand path* is shaped today the actual per-



formance has been located to the domain of specialists, whereas individual families act as sponsors in a patronage relationship to reciters: they either book and pay for an *Akhand path* in the gurdwara or invite paid reciters to their homes, shop or wherever the recitations is to be undertaken. In domestic settings individual lay Sikhs with sound knowledge of Gurmukhi may complete parts of the reading, but it is paid reciters who assume the final responsibility for the proper performance of an *Akhand path*.

To control the monetary transactions of these services the gurdwara committee in Varanasi has organized an administrative system according to which the sponsoring family only needs to advance book a recitation that will be carried out by professional reciters in the gurdwara. The manager of the gurdwara keeps a special log book in which he registers the name of the sponsor, the time schedule of the performance, and sometimes notes down the reasons for which the readings is conducted. The sponsor will pay a fixed price for a performance and receive a written receipt in return. With all expenses included, a sponsorship of *Akhand path* may turn out to be a costly project, which poorer families only reserved for major life events, such as at the time of birth, marriage and death. In 2001 the fixed "price" (*bheta*) of an *Akhand path* in the gurdwaras of Varanasi amounted 1300 rupees, which included salaries for *pathis* (200 rupees each), coverings to Guru Granth Sahib, and the cost for public distribution of the sacred pudding (*karah prashad*). The expenses would be considerably heavier if the recitation was arranged in a private house.<sup>465</sup> A few of my interviewees with a variable financial situation over the past years told me they desisted from arranging yearly recitations in memory of deceased parents, but as soon as they got the domestic economy straight resumed the custom. One elder man said he did not stage the annual *Akhand path* in memory of his departed father for nineteen years due to pecuniary worries. In a state of destitution another man said he had promised God to arrange monthly *Akhand path* if his business would run at a profit again. The chairman of the gurdwara committee in Varanasi, on the other hand, used to organize two performances of *Akhand path* at his house every month in memory of his deceased wife and daughter.

Among the wealthier urban middle-class the sponsorship of *Akhand path* has become a popular opportunity to engage in a religious activity which requires minimal personal involvement and bestows the maximum of merits and social prestige, especially to those who can afford to invite the whole community to partake in the event. Many of my interlocutors used to advance book one or more readings in the thirty or forty days long series of *Akhand path* which the gurdwara committee arranged before festivals commemorating the Sikh Gurus. Some of the families kept a custom of sponsoring one or more numbered readings in the chain performance, such the first or the last *Akhand path*, in honor of an ancestor and thus combined family motives for arranging readings with the collective celebration of a Sikh Guru. The

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<sup>465</sup> In 2005 the "price" for an *Akhand path* at Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar amounted to 3100 rupees and the waiting list for sponsorship was 11 years. *The Indian Express*, 2005-10-27.

clients are expected to be physically present at the beginning and end of the performance, and preferably take time out to listen to the words mediated. Even if the organization of *Akhand path* and other readings of Guru Granth Sahib have become a specialist activity, people do not believe it reduces the expected benefit of the sponsor. As one interlocutor reasoned, offering money for a devotional cause is always a meritorious act, while accepting payment for a reading job is worldly attachment and thus the major benefit will go to the paying sponsor. At the end of a program the sponsor's name will be publicly announced and he or she will be given a robe of honor (*sirropa*) as a mark of respect from the Guru's house. If they for some reason are absent the expected results of a reading will nevertheless accrue to him or her.<sup>466</sup>

This does not imply that clients are discharged from all liabilities, especially not if *Akhand path* is performed in a domestic setting. The public gurdwaras render assistance in lending scriptures to families for unbroken readings in connection with life-cycle rituals or inaugurations of a new house or a shop. The family is then obligated to offer the scripture an honourable seat in a room that has been cleaned and cleared of larger furniture to provide open spaces for gatherings and furnish all the obligatory ritual paraphernalia, such as clothes, cushions and whisk. Newly purchased cotton carpets and sheets will be covering the floor. When a team of paid reciters are hired from outside the family is expected to supply them with food, tea, hot water for ablutions, and sometimes shelter.<sup>467</sup> The sponsor is also held responsible for the preparation of *karah prashad*, the blessed pudding, which will be offered to Guru Granth Sahib at three times during the forty-eight hours period. Some families may feed a brass oil lamp with clarified butter or oil to keep it burning beside the throne throughout the performance. Apart from these practical and spatial arrangements, a sponsorship generally presumes devotion and confidence in the Sikh teaching, which the staging of *Akhand path* is itself sufficient proof of. Unlike professional reciters, the individual or family does not have to observe the Khalsa discipline in any strict sense, although they should refrain from meat and alcoholic drinks for as long as the reading continues in order to uphold a degree of purity of their bodies and the space in which the Guru Granth Sahib resides. Altogether these preparations symbolically cast the Guru-scripture as a noble and honoured guest who is temporarily visiting the house to be heard and shown hospitality.

The performance of *Akhand path* is far more elaborate than just a forty-eight hour cover-to-cover reading of the Guru Granth Sahib and involves a set of regulative rules. Since *Akhand path* should be unbroken and each word of scripture enunciated in a low or loud voice, the reading is divided into shifts and will be passed from one reciter to the next without any break. In general a skilled *pathi* can recite thirty pages

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<sup>466</sup> More rarely sponsoring clients may lodge complaints with professional reciters, although these objections more often mirror concerns about sincerity conditions and the probability of improper conducts when reciters are paid, rather than being protests based on actual faults committed.

<sup>467</sup> One woman also alleged this as a reason why people choose *Akhand path* instead of weekly or monthly *path*: they only need to do *seva*, selfless service, to the reciters for three days.

of the scripture in one hour, but to avoid errors from fatigue each of them usually reads for two to three hours at a twelve hour interval, which equals four shifts during the forty-eight hour long recitation. Some of the local reciters have acquired fame for their proficiency in reading. In year 2001 I met Trilok Singh, an 82-year-old man from the neighboring town Ramnagar who had been a *pathi* for more than fifty years. His colleagues verified that he read more than sixty pages in one hour as he had memorized large sections of the scripture. In case one reciter reads slowly then the others have to cover it by reading faster to complete it within the given time limit. To keep the reading unbroken the reciters have developed a sign language to communicate human needs that may arise during the reading. Pointing with the little finger, for instance, signifies a more urgent necessity to visit the washroom, while a thumb up denotes thirst or hunger. Nearby the scriptural dais the reciters usually keep a small bell to ring for someone to take over their reading if they are stricken with drowsiness and need a break.

Although no standardized speech style exists for recitations like *Akhand path*, the reader is likely to employ melodies and intonations of individual choosing to bring out the rhyme and rhythm of verses within the text and make the reproduction of *gurbani* aesthetically appealing. A common technique of embellishing the recitation is to create a melody out of three keys in a descending order of pitch. Depending upon the metrical structure of the verse recited, four or more lines will follow the same melody, while the end of a verse, usually the line which carries the name of Nanak, is given a melodic frill that will be pitched higher than the preceding lines and given a longer intonation. Professional reciters may use their vocal capacities to glide between the tones in melody and know where to intone words to bring out the poetic dynamism and beauty of the scripture.

During the course of a reading, the reciter should ideally avoid any contamination of the pages caused by bodily fluids. More orthodox views prescribe that reciters preferably cover the mouth with a large handkerchief while reading, even if this practice is rarely followed.<sup>468</sup> As I observed in Varanasi, the *granthi*, who often reads the first verses of the scripture when an *Akhand path* is starting and subsequently allows a reciter to continue the reading, masks his mouth with a shawl on these occasions, while the reciter taking over usually does not. Many of the professional reciters have by years of practice developed a recital technique where they are using minimal mouth gestures, and thus expose less saliva while controlling their diaphragm and breathing to enhance the sound of their voices. They hardly move their lips even if their voices will penetrate the space inside the gurdwara, even without the assistance of loudspeakers.

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<sup>468</sup> During my fieldwork I observed that only reciters at the Sikh center of Patna Sahib masked their mouth during performances of *Akhand path*.

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## THE STRUCTURE OF AKHAND PATH PERFORMANCES

THE READING	LINGUISTIC ACTS	PARALINGUISTIC ACTS
<b>Day 1:</b>		Installation ceremony The scripture is opened Take <i>Hukam</i> Offer the pudding when the last line of <i>Ardas</i> is read. Distribution of <i>karah prashad</i> after the fifth stanza of <i>Japji Sahib</i> is read.
The reading starts on page 1.	Recitation of <i>Anand Sahib</i> Recitation of <i>Ardas</i> Recitation of <i>Hukam</i>	
<b>Day 2:</b> The reading reaches the middle	Recitation of <i>Anand Sahib</i> Recitation of <i>Ardas</i>	Offer the pudding when the last line of <i>Ardas</i> is read
The reading reaches page 705 of the scripture		Distribution of <i>karah prashad</i>
<b>Day 3:</b> <i>Bhog</i> ceremony, Reading of pages 1426 – 30	Recitation of <i>Anand Sahib</i> Recitation of <i>Ardas</i>	Offer the pudding when the last line of <i>Ardas</i> is read. Distribution of <i>karah prashad</i> before page 1430.
	Recitation of <i>Hukam</i> Speech of thanks to sponsors and reciters Recitation of <i>Kirtan Sohila</i> Recitation of <i>Choti Ardas</i> Salutations	<i>Sukhasan</i> Ceremony

Figure 16.

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To accomplish a successful and favorable performance of *Akhand path* there is a set of linguistic and paralinguistic acts that should be completed during the forty-eight-hour period in addition to the actual reading of the scripture's 1430 pages (Figure 16). These highly formalized acts go by separate names and are clustered in opening, parallel and concluding units which co-jointly compose the internal structure of the performance. Similar to the daily liturgies in the gurdwara *Akhand path* is framed by the solemnized installation (*Prakash*) and restoration (*Sukhasan*) of Guru Granth Sahib. When the scripture has been opened the attendant should take the

*Hukam* and render the verse twice before the actual reading of the scripture starts on page one. Two days later he will repeat the *Hukam* at the very end of the performance before the scripture is put to rest. Many think that the *Hukam* pertaining to an *Akhand path* is predicting or at least pointing to the result that will come out from a recitation and should always be handed over to the sponsoring individual or family. In case the client cannot attend the performance the gurdwara manager will send them the divine order by mail after the reading has been completed.<sup>469</sup>

Like other Sikh ceremonies, *Akhand path* always includes readings of the *Ardas*. As I will discuss more in detail in the following section of this chapter, the supplication consists of a standardized text that supplies a break or a textual “opening”, in which people may insert personal or collective petitions to God. Accordingly, when people are arranging *Akhand path* for special causes or purposes, they may formulate their wishes or requests in the supplication. The reading of *Ardas* is always preceded by the reading of Guru Amardas’ hymn *Anand Sahib* (GGS p. 917) which is believed to support the Sikh prayer and boost blissful qualities to the sacred pudding, *karah prashad*, which will be distributed afterwards. In the context of an *Akhand path* the distribution of *karah prashad* is often perceived as a boon from the favorable reading. These parallel acts of reciting *Anand Sahib*, *Ardas* and offering food demonstrate how separated acts are bound to precision in time and sequence within the frame of a performance. During the forty-eight hour long performance all these acts should be repeated no less than three times: in the beginning, the middle and at the very end. The actual reading from Guru Granth Sahib will only start after the Sikh prayer has been read, and the sacred pudding should be distributed when the first five stanzas of hymn *Japji Sahib* have been completed. Twelve hours later, when the recitation reaches page 705, or the “middle” of Guru Granth Sahib, the pudding will again be served to participants. Consequently, when the reciter arrives at page 704, another person starts reading *Anand Sahib* and *Ardas*, so that the food distribution coincides with the reading of page 705. With a similar exactitude these three parallel acts should be carried out in the very end of the reading, but before it concludes. An individual reciter is therefore never working in solitude, but partnered by one to three persons who answer for the prayer and the additional hymns, as well as the preparation and distribution of the sacred food. During performances in the gurdwara the *granthi* normally starts the actual reading of Guru Granth Sahib and answers for the opening and concluding ceremonies as well as the reading of *Ardas*, while a reciter will take over the recitation after five or more stanzas of *Japji Sahib* and other employees serve the pudding.

The Sikhs may offer many theological and practical rationales of the demand for additional acts in *Akhand path*. Naturally, the scripture needs to be opened before a

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<sup>469</sup> When I got a *Hukam* from an *Akhand path* performed in year 2000 for a sick family member the *granthi* expounded the meaning of it and advised me to convey it to my family member. At that time, the *Hukam* reached Sweden by email; on another occasion the divine order was sent via SMS from a friend’s mobile phone, as I was not present in Varanasi.

recitation and its divine nature always implies a respectful behavior and usage. But the mode of performing these acts and the way in which they are pieced together in a performance sequence is hardly left to random choice. While the actual reading of the Guru Granth Sahib dominantly runs through this structure, the parallel acts are structured according to their internal interplay and dependence, and considered necessary in order to accomplish a successful performance. Particularly the reading of *Anand Sahib* and *Ardas* as well as the offering and distribution of *karah prashad* are distinctly relational in that the acts should be performed in sequence and assist one another. When the sacred pudding is to be distributed it becomes compulsory to read the Sikh supplication, as the food is considered “accepted” after being offered to the Guru through the reading of *Ardas*. And, if the petition is to be read, it is also obligatory to render the six stanzas of *Anand Sahib* as they “assist” the petition and the pudding. The brief outline of the performance structure may illustrate that stipulation and formalization are salient features of an *Akhand path*: the different acts compose a performance which is not significantly affected by the intentions of the reciters or the sponsors but is carried out in a similarly prescribed way irrespective of the setting or underlying causes. What distinguishes one performance from another is the variance of *Hukam* and the motive or reason inserted in the textual “opening” of the Sikh supplication. Unlike other acts during *Akhand path* performances, these two sequences are open to more variable content.

#### SAMPAT PATH – THE WRAPPED READING

The most demanding recitation of all is *Sampat path* because of its advanced formal requirements. In this *path* the reader interpolates a freely chosen line or stanza drawn from the Guru Granth Sahib after he or she has completed a hymn or an apportioned section of the scripture, and then continues to repeat the verse after every completed hymn throughout the recitation. The Sanskrit word *sampat* is used for the Hindu practice to suffix a mantra with another mantra, by which the former is consequently called *sampat mantra*.<sup>470</sup> As Lutgendorf (1991) writes, *sampat* is a “wrapper” that “serves as an enclosure or frame for each unit of recitation”.<sup>471</sup> In a Sikh context, the word *sampat* has come to name one method of reading of Guru Granth Sahib, in which either a single *gurbani* line or a verse is inserted after each hymn as an invocation to serve a specific end. Different groups of reciters within the Sikh community have developed varying techniques to choose the inserted verses and schedule the reading. *Sampat path* can either be continuous or broken and adjusted to a freely chosen time period, such as a week or month. The unbroken reading is called *Sampat Akhand path*, while the open reading is termed *Sampath Path Sadharan*. In general the broken *Sampat path* requires at least two reciters: one who does the actual reading from Guru Granth Sahib and another who inserts the selected verse. When *Sampat path* is unbroken and scheduled for a shorter duration, it usually requires a group of

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<sup>470</sup> Singh, T. 1998: 38.

<sup>471</sup> Lutgendorf 1991: 69.

professional reciters who read in relays for five to seven days. The length of the verse chosen for reiterations, and the technique by which the reader repeats the verse, will determine the amount of time dedicated to the *path*.

Although the reciters in Varanasi had never performed *Sampat path* themselves, they had observed performances at other places and instructed me briefly on the methods by which *sampats* can be used. A common method is to select the *mulmantra* or *Hukam* that comes out when the scripture is ceremonially opened for a recitation. In the latter case, the particular hymn that constitutes the *Hukam* is written down on a paper, and while one person starts to read from the scripture, another will repeat the *Hukam* after each completed sequence of verses in Guru Granth Sahib. When *Sampat path* is undertaken for a special purpose or desired effects reciters will instead choose a *sampat* which semantically corresponds to the stated reason.<sup>472</sup> The metric form of the *sampat* verse may decide the number of times it should be repeated at each interpolation. If the verse is made up of one line the reciter will read it only once, and if it contains two lines he will read the same verse twice. An even more advanced way of reciting is to add each selected *sampat* with a repetition of the *mulmantra* after each completed line or verse of the scripture. In this way the reciters may build up layers of *gurbani* verses, which frame the hymns being read from the scripture.

A few of my interviewees in Varanasi held that *Sampat path* was a too time-consuming way to perform the Guru Granth Sahib. An elderly businessman, who was a reciter in addition to his ordinary job, said: "If you get up [and take a break] and come back on duty, then you have to take a shower and change clothes again. You can not come back wearing the same clothes as before." When I asked if he knew if anyone organized *Sampat path* in the local community, he spontaneously replied: "Who has that much time? This *path* requires much time." During my fieldwork I received information only of one *Sampat path* in 2000 which the then chairman of the gurdwara committee (VGPC) arranged. Paid reciters invited from Punjab conducted this reading.

#### THE PLEASURABLE ENDING

When a recitation of Guru Granth Sahib – broken or unbroken – is approaching the end, families and friends will gather at the gurdwara or the place at which a *path* is going, to listen to the reading of the four last pages of the scripture (pages 1426 to 1430). From a textual viewpoint, these pages comprise four separate compositions: a set of couplets of Guru Tegh Bahadur; "the closing seal" (*Mundavani*) and a couplet of the fifth Guru Arjan; and finally a twelve-versed composition called "the rosary of

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<sup>472</sup> For instance, a local *pathi* asserted that the following hymn of Guru Arjan was used in *Sampat path* for protective purposes: "He does not let His devotees see the difficult times; this is His innate nature. Giving His hand, He protects His devotee; with each and every breath, He cherishes him" (GGS: 682).

musical measures" (*Ragmala*).<sup>473</sup> The solemnized reading of the final end goes by the name *Samapati path*, or "the closing recitation" and forms a part of a larger ceremony referred to as *bhog*, the "pleasurable" ending. Even if a professional reciter or a family member conducts the actual reading alone on behalf of the whole family, all relatives will most likely partake in the event of *bhog*. When a recitation has been undertaken with a desired end in view – to bless and protect a newborn child, a new house or business – the family often invites the whole community to enjoy and benefit from the auspicious closure. The celebration of *bhog* is then scheduled to a propitious time and date that will be notified in advance, either through verbal communication, notices in the gurdwaras, or invitation letters. The beneficial effects of completing an *Akhand path* are not restricted to Sikhs. Prior to the yearly board exams at *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* in Varanasi the recitation is carried out at the headmistress's office to help the students to come out well. The completion of this reading is neatly adjusted to the day when Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh students from class ten to twelve receive their admission cards from the governmental school board of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>474</sup>

To boost the pleasant atmosphere the family may invite *ragis* to perform devotional music (*kirtan*) and serve sweets and food to the guests. A great number of families in Varanasi also keep a custom of committing the *bhog* ceremony of a broken reading (*Khulla path*) of *Guru Granth Sahib* or *sanchis* to professional reciters from the gurdwara. Family members will then recite up to page 1426 (*Shalok Mahala* 9) themselves and invite the reciters to complete the last four pages publicly at their house or the gurdwara. This provides the individual family an opportunity to have private recitations blessed by the congregation and allows them to hand over the responsibility to specialists with skill in the ritual procedures. The *bhog* ceremony may just as well be a small and private event, only for the closest relations who gather around *Guru Granth Sahib* on memorial days of ancestors or at the beginning of a new solar or lunar month to share the ceremonial closure of a recitation and start a new one.

Although the *bhog* ceremony can range from simple to elaborate, depending upon the situational context and for which purpose and by whom the recitation is undertaken, it is a religious event that involves a handful of stipulated acts to be performed in proximity to the final reading. Devotional offerings, presented to God, *Guru Granth Sahib*, and the Sikh congregation, make an integral part of this event. On the day of the solemnized conclusion, the family may give various gifts to the gurdwara – money, food, and new robes (*rumala*) for *Guru Granth Sahib* – that are placed before the scriptural throne. In connection with the traditional *bhog* ceremony

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<sup>473</sup> The authorship and canonical status of the *Ragmala* has caused recurrent controversies in the Sikh community. Since 1940s each Sikh congregation can decide whether they choose to read the closing verses in recitations of the scripture (Mann 2005).

<sup>474</sup> As the principal of *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* explained, the *Guru Granth Sahib* will be installed in her office and the auspicious conclusion will be adjusted to the day when the admission cards arrive from the UP office. The children get the cards after having performed *matha tekna* before the scripture and recieved *karah prashad*.



of an *Akhand path* performed after the death of a family member, the chief mourners will make a pecuniary donation and take fruits, food, kitchen equipment, bedding, and even a bed to the inner sanctum of the gurdwara to be offered in the name of the deceased. These articles, symbolizing domestic appliances of the departed, are to be used by the community in the gurdwara. The size and value of the material gifts vary depending on the ability and wishes of the individual family. The far most significant offering of all, however, is the recitation itself. At the very end of a *Khulla path* and before closing an *Akhand path* the individual reciter or the *granthi* will perform the *Ardas*, in which he or she imparts the fulfilled recitations as an offering to God. The intercessor will plead forgiveness for all errors committed and state for whom and which reason the recitation was executed. Depending upon individual beliefs and motives, the *path* may be presented either as a vow that was carried out to seek divine assistance in a needy situation, a votive offering to express thanks to God for divine help already received, or just an act of devotion. In either case, the supplication establishes a communicative link between humans and God, through which the completed *path* may be presented as an offering to the divine. The oblation in speech sanctifies both the recitation and the purpose for which it was executed. A recitation which has not been presented and offered to the divine by means of the supplication is generally considered incomplete. The presence of the *sangat*, or the holy congregation, during the performance of *Ardas* is believed to strengthen the qualities of this sanctification. "God lives in the congregation (*sangat*)... by reading *Ardas* in the *sangat* you receive a blessing by the congregation", one man commented on the *bhog* ceremony. This is one reason as to why individual families invite the circle of relatives and friends to hear the final pages of Guru Granth Sahib and partake in the ending prayer.

In line with standard procedures of any Sikh ceremony the *bhog* ceremony will conclude with the taking of a *Hukam* and distribution of *karah prashad*, which is seen as reciprocal gifts for the recitation completed and offered. In cases when people arrange *Akhand path* to celebrate the reception of divine gifts, such as a child who is born from the fulfilment of prayers to God and not by natural means, it is customary to arrange a large free kitchen (*langar*) to the whole congregation. Both the recitation and the generous distribution of food are regarded as acts of thanksgiving for the godly blessings received.

#### DIVINE WORDS INGESTED

To Sikhs the Gurus' words are the highest spiritual power and teaching appropriated through readings and memorization, and instantly reproduced in recitations. But Sikhs will also ascribe material dimensions to language by figuratively and literally referring to verses of Guru Granth Sahib as an *amrit*, a "nectar", which can be internalized in the body by being drunk and has power to purify humans and their environment both morally and physically. The notion of *gurbani* as a material substance to be imbibed by worshippers is not an invention of local Sikhs but is contained in the Sikh scripture itself. Etymologically the term *amrit* is a Sanskrit adjective meaning

immortal (an antithesis of death or mortality – *mrt*) and a noun recurrently used in Hindu mythology for the ambrosia of the gods conferring immortality. In the Sikh tradition *amrit* bears a similar connotation of being a divine substance, although the term has been intimately associated with the celestial words laid down in the Guru Granth Sahib. In the poetic language of the Gurus, the word *amrit* frequently signifies a divine essence inherent in the divine word (*shabad*),<sup>475</sup> name (*nam*),<sup>476</sup> speech (*bani*),<sup>477</sup> will (*bhāna*),<sup>478</sup> and the Guru's teaching (*gurmat*).<sup>479</sup> In some compositions these various aspects of the divine are portrayed as means by which the ambrosial nectar, stemming from a divine source, is obtained or granted to those Guru-oriented persons who are fully engaged in devotion and have reached a state of union with the divine.<sup>480</sup> In other verses the ontological status and essence of *amrit* is fully identified with divine words.<sup>481</sup> When a local *granthi* in Varanasi was inquired about the meaning of the word *amrit* he spontaneously quoted the popular stanza of Guru Ramdas in *Rag Nat Narayan*:

Gurbani is the embodiment of the Guru and the Guru is the embodiment of Gurbani. In the whole of Gurbani is contained the Nectar [*amrit*].<sup>482</sup>

According to his exegesis, *amrit* is both a divine essence inherent in *gurbani* and a direct experience – a “flavour” or “taste” (*ras*) – of God that is generated whenever people engage in the words of Guru Granth Sahib with sincere devotion. Over and again, my informants compared the reading of *gurbani* hymns with eating or tasting sweets, particularly brown sugar lumps (*ghor*). Alluding to oft-quoted hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib,<sup>483</sup> a few exemplified the experience of God with the act of giving sweets to a mute man: he can easily feel the taste of it but is incapable of expressing his feeling in words.<sup>484</sup> Engaging in *gurbani* generates aesthetic, sensual, and ontologi-

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<sup>475</sup> See e.g. GGS: 35, 119.

<sup>476</sup> GGS: 29, 33, 49, 155, 522, 1189.

<sup>477</sup> GGS: 72, 494.

<sup>478</sup> GGS: 31, 119.

<sup>479</sup> GGS: 493, 494.

<sup>480</sup> GGS: 352, 511, 918, 1126. The prototype and motif of *amrit* as divine substance transmitted to the Sikh Guru is found in the *Puratan Janam-sakhi* (see Chapter 2).

<sup>481</sup> A popular hymn of Guru Amardas goes: “the Shabad is Amrit; the Lord's Bani is Amrit” (GGS: 119).

<sup>482</sup> GGS: 982.

<sup>483</sup> See for instance Guru Arjan's verse: “I drink in the Invaluable Nectar of the Naam, the Name of the Lord. Like the mute, I can only smile - I cannot speak of its flavor” (GGS: 1205). Namdev writes: “The mute tastes the most sublime ambrosial nectar, but if you ask him to describe it, he cannot” (GGS: 657).

<sup>484</sup> An elderly shopkeeper added that the sweetness of *gurbani* always remains irrespective of place and time, whether you eat a piece of sugar in the shop, at home, or anywhere, it will still give a sweet flavour.

cal savour of the divine that is beyond descriptions. These significations ascribed to the word *amrit* are given quite literal interpretations when the Gurus' verses are transferred to contexts of ritual practices.

Drinking *gurbani* verses is a wide spread practice in the whole Sikh community today. In contemporary Sikh discourses the term *amrit* generally refers to the particular sweetened nectar-water that is distributed to neophytes during the Khalsa ceremony (*Khande di pahul*). Given the centrality of Khalsa norms within the Sikh community, this conventional meaning of *amrit* has been exposed to various scholarly historical and symbolic interpretations.<sup>485</sup> As I mentioned in the previous chapter those who ingested the nectar in this ceremony become "bearers of *amrit*" (*Amritdhari*) and are conceived as "completed" Sikhs. At the local level, however, the word *amrit* will imply taxonomies of additional consecrated waters that are divided into subcategories depending upon the ways by which the water-nectar has been prepared and for which purposes. There are blessed waters prepared from recitations of selected *gurbani* stanzas (*shabad amrit*), recitations of the whole Guru Granth Sahib (*bhog amrit*), or just the name of God – *Vahiguru* (*gurmantra amrit*). Waters that have welled out of sacred locations and are associated with the wonders of the human Gurus in the past are likewise labelled *amrit*. Even tap water from reservoirs is occasionally treated as purifying nectar if it has been properly prepared with *gurbani*. There is also one particular *amrit* for the purpose of protection (*rakhsa amrit*) and another to be used as medication (*amrit dava*) or as a drinkable amulet for varying curative purposes. In the latter cases, *gurbani* verses are used in *amrit* because the purpose for which *amrit* is prepared is understood as being mentioned in the verse itself. The content or theme of a sacred hymn text transforms to an agentive force with power to bring about specific desirable goals in the social world. Yet what all these emic categories of *amrit* have in common is that they all are held to be consecrated waters, imbued with positive substances and transformative powers of the Guru, which carry divine protection and blessings. Drinking the fluids is believed to have bio-moral effects on recipients and purify their immediate surroundings.

#### SUBSTANCE THEORY

In classical anthropology different indigenous ideologies of substances have been interpreted in light of transactions of gifts and the culture-specific constructions of social persons. According to the ethno-sociology developed by Marriot (1976), people in South Asian contexts have a monistic rather than a dualistic thinking and do not separate between the bio-physical world and socio-cultural world in the same ways as a Western conceptual dualism. Moral and nature, sacred and profane, or spirit and matter are not necessarily contradictory terms. Instead South Asian ideologies are

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<sup>485</sup> Kaur Singh suggests that the mythical *Puratan Janam-sakhi* reference of Guru Nanak's reception of ambrosia in a divine abode became a part of the collective memory of Sikhs, which Guru Gobind Singh recreated in the *Khalsa* ceremony (Kaur Singh 2004).

characterized by a “cognitive nonduality of action and actor, code and substance”.<sup>486</sup> Even words are not something abstract and transcendental to the natural world, but believed to stem from a perfect (divine) substance that is embodied in ether, minds, bodies, and “in substances that may have physical attributes, such as sound, shape, matter, force, etc.”<sup>487</sup> The theory suggests that substances, both natural substances in the human body and substances which pass through the body, possess inherent values, or are “coded substances” which people transact in social interactions and through which they transform and constitute indigenous categories of persons. People are therefore not considered to be indivisible units – individuals – but composites of subtle and gross substances they take in from different sources. They are transactional and transformational “dividuals” who procure appropriate substances by continually engaging in steady relationships in which they transfer a wide range of coded substances.<sup>488</sup> According to Marriot and Inden (1977) the substance theory is valid for contexts in which humans interact with supernatural beings: “Hindu devotionism (including Virasaivism and Sikhism) manipulates divine substance, often reciprocally, so as to initiate humans into higher genus of gods while they retain participation in their original, lower genera.”<sup>489</sup>

In an essay that starts out from the translation controversy of Guru Granth Sahib, Dusenbery (1992) challengingly applies Marriot’s theories to contemporary Sikh worship to suggest that the controversy is rooted in two different ideologies of language: a dualistic ideology of language that privileges semantic meanings and cognitive qualities of texts, whereas a non-dualistic ideology, which is prevalent among the Sikhs, “recognizes the material as well as cognitive properties of language (especially articulated speech) and refuses to privilege semantico-referential meaning at the expense of other properties that language is thought to possess.”<sup>490</sup> The non-dualistic ideology of language merges semantic and sound properties. To Sikhs brought up with this ideology, the Guru Granth Sahib is not merely a book to be comprehended for a moral teaching but involves a physiological engagement with God through the transformative power of the Gurus’ words. Even if one does not understand propositional meanings *gurbani* has power to affect one’s mind and body in a positive way. Thus, the translation dilemma does not necessarily concern traditional technical translation problems on form and content, but rather involves perceptions of the text as a Guru enshrining the original speech and sound from the Gurus’ mouths. To support the theory of a non-dualistic ideology of language Dusenbery argues that different forms of Sikh worship and uses of the Guru Granth Sahib, such as recitation

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<sup>486</sup> Marriot & Inden 1977: 229.

<sup>487</sup> Marriot & Inden 1977: 231.

<sup>488</sup> Marriott 1976. In an ethnography of Melanesia, Strathern (1988) expounds the notion of dividuals to argue that the construction of Melanesian personhood is made up of social interactions and relations in which people are enmeshed. Personhood is therefore more divisible and partible than the bounded and intact version of individuals which is prevalent in the west.

<sup>489</sup> Marriot & Inden 1977: 236.

<sup>490</sup> Dusenbery 1992: 388 – 389.

(*path*), music (*kirtan*) and distribution of consecrated food (*prashad*), are media through which divine “coded substances” of the Guru are channelled. Engagement in these worship forms involves transactions of substances in sound, sight, food, etc., between the Guru and devotees which are believed to have material/physical/physiological, as well as spiritual mental/cognitive effects upon their recipients. When listening to devotional music, taking *darshan* of the Guru Granth Sahib, or drinking nectar-water, Sikhs are incorporating substances that will re-compose their persons to a “religious genus” shared by other devotees. They establish substantial and moral connectedness to the Guru which is believed to generate bi-moral transformations of persons.<sup>491</sup>

Although one needs to be cautious with theories that attempt to derive universal principles underlying indigenous ideologies at the expense of change and diversity, the notion of substance is ever-present when local Sikhs talk of the various types of *amrit* and consecrated food (*prashad*).<sup>492</sup> The preparation of *amrit* presumes that recitations of *gurbani* will transform ordinary water (*pani*) to blessed nectar which people may use for ingestion or to besprinkle persons, houses or objects with. By producing *gurbani* in sound directly over the water or in its close vicinity the words are believed to materialize as a hidden essence in the water. The recitation is an act of transmitting words through the vehicle of sound to fluids that will be consecrated and imbued with substances of *gurbani*. In more specified terms than the scholarly discussion on transformative worship substances, locals assert that different types of *amrit* will produce different effects on people depending upon a set of factors during the ritual preparation, such as the identity of the agent preparing the nectar, the space in which recitations take place, the ritual instruments utilized, and dispositions of recipients. Moreover, the identity and transformative power ascribed to particular waters used in Sikh ceremonies are intimately connected with semantic properties of the recited *gurbani* hymns or what these hymns have come to represent in the broader Sikh tradition. In healing contexts people will choose a *gurbani* verse which bears semantic links to the purpose for which the *amrit* is prepared. It is the semantico-referential meaning of a text that determines the expected material and spiritual bene-

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<sup>491</sup> Dusenbery 1992: 395.

<sup>492</sup> Scholarly claims about monistic or non-dualistic ideologies in non-western societies have also been criticized for basing models on abstract theories which have little bearing in the more complex empirical reality and they start out from the dichotomies (western/non-western reasoning; dualistic/non-dualistic thought) that they attempt to move away from (see eg. Gell 1998, Carstens 2004). Based on my own empirical material I am more hesitant of a general application of the theory of worship substances to all Sikh practices, as well as the separation between cognitive and sound properties of words in order to prove how they are interconnected in the non-dualistic ideology of language. Words, believed to be of divine origin, may be ascribed a number of illocutionary and prelocutionary functions because of their ontological status. Sound, just like script, is considered a vehicle to disclose and transmit *gurbani* and attains sacredness because of what it contains.

fits from drinking the nectar. To illustrate how the selection of texts and the ritual preparation influence the properties of *amrit* I will here exemplify with two of the most known and common consecrated waters in Sikh ceremonies – one which is prepared by the dagger and the other by the double-edged sword – and then continue with a general discussion on the factors which transform ordinary water to sacred nectar.

#### NECTAR OF THE DAGGER AND THE SWORD

In Varanasi Sikhs usually distinguish between two key types of sacred waters used in ceremonies: *khandeivala amrit* and *kirpanvala amrit*. The first type – *khandeivala amrit* – refers to consecrated water distributed during the *Khande di pahul* ceremony to *Amritdhari* novices. As I described in the previous section, during this ceremony five men symbolizing “the five beloved” (*panj pyare*) imitate the event of Khalsa in 1699. In a sequential order they will recite, one by one, the five compositions *Japji Sahib*, *Jap Sahib*, *Tav Savaiyye*, *Chaupai Sahib* and *Anand Sahib* (verse 1 – 5, and 40) over a clean steel cauldron filled with water that has been sweetened with hallowed sugar cakes (*batasa*). The five men sit in *vir asan*, the “brave posture”, while stirring the water with a double-edged sword (*khande*) in the right hand. The preparation and distribution of *amrit* in the Khalsa ceremony always takes place within a confined space opened only for *Amritdhari* attendants and neophytes and with the Guru Granth Sahib in attendance.

*Kirpanvala amrit*, on the other hand, signifies waters over which individual hymns from the Sikh scriptures are recited while stirring the water with a Sikh dagger (*kirpan*). The most popular text used for this nectar is Guru Nanak’s *Japji Sahib*. On some occasions the *granthi* will recite all the 40 verses of the composition, at other times only the first five verses. The preparation of this nectar is quite simple, “a five-minute job”, as a local *granthi* expressed it. Seated nearby the Guru Granth Sahib, the attendant will recite the text over an iron bowl filled with sweetened water and stir the water with his dagger (*kirpan*). Similar to procedures in the Khalsa ceremony, the *kirpanvala amrit* is sprinkled over the receiver’s forehead and eyes five times each, and then presented for drinking five times. Like other ceremonies, he concludes the distribution with a reading of *Anand Sahib* and the Sikh supplication. The water-nectar of *Japji* can be given to anyone who desires it, irrespective of religious and social status, and is generally distributed in ceremonies surrounding childbirth. The nectar is believed to purify the mother and protect the newborn child, who will be incorporated into social life after drinking the nectar-water. On request the *granthi* may also prepare *kirpanvala amrit* of shorter verses which semantically correspond with particular needs of individuals.<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> A distinctive category of nectar-waters is *rakhsa amrit*, literally “protection nectar”, which is ingested as a preventive and protecting measure in life situations. When preparing this nectar the local *granthis* utilized a set of stanzas by Guru Arjan which treat themes like eradication of

The two types of nectars have power to bring about quite different effects on the drinker: whereas *kirpanvala amrit* purifies and protects the recipient in different life situations, the *khandevara amrit* accomplishes a complete purification that will transform the bio-moral identity of a person. A local *granthi* explicated the distinction in the following way:

I do *kirpanvala amrit* in the same way as they do the *amrit* of the five beloved (*panj pyare*), but the five beloved use *khandā*, in this I use *kirpan*. The *kirpanvala amrit* is for purity [*shuddh*]. The *khandevara amrit* has power [*chamta*] to change a person. Whatever he or she has done in the past, after taking this nectar they start to perform religious duties. It brings about a change in them.

Giving *kirpanvala amrit* to a child after birth has undoubtedly other significations than distributing *khandevara amrit* to a neophyte in the Khalsa ceremony, yet the two events are comparable considering the ritual preparation and uses.

Seen from a historical perspective, it is possible to argue that the current uses of *kirpanvala amrit* is a modern extension of the pre-Khalsa ceremony *Charan pahul*, or the “foot- initiation” that candidates earlier drank as a token of submission to the Guru and admission into the Sikh community. The Sikh Guru or his deputy would prepare this *amrit* by touching water with the toe of his right foot and thereby transformed the water into a sacred “foot-nectar” (*charan amrit*). Drinking the water which the Guru’s toe had touched was to receive residues of the Guru’s feet that would enhance the ability to achieve salvation. The creation of Khalsa in 1699 introduced a new initiation ceremony – *Khande di pahul* – in which the foot nectar of the Guru was exchanged with water prepared with the recitation of five *gurbani* verses and stirred with the double-edged sword by five beloved Sikhs representing the Khalsa community. Although the new Khalsa ceremony replaced the earlier *Charan pahul* as a Sikh initiation ceremony, the concept and practice of the “foot-nectar” was sustained in new modified forms. As reflected in the eighteenth century *rahit-nama* of Chaupa Singh, for instance, a significant distinction between *Khande di pahul* and *Charan pahul* developed subsequent to the event of Khalsa: whereas the former was intended for male Sikhs who affirmed their loyalty and readiness to fight for Khalsa, the latter was to be maintained and performed for non-Sikhs and community members who were “not yet ripe” (*kahe pille*), including women, men, and children. Chaupa Singh gives *Charan pahul* subservient status to the Khalsa ceremony, yet argues that it should be retained for non-Sikhs. As Mann (2004) suggests, Chaupa Singh reiterates to non-Sikhs the new centres of authority – the Sikh scripture (*granth*) and the five beloved as representing the community (*panth*) – by prescribing new ways of preparing *Charan pahul*, either by washing the bed-post of Guru Granth Sahib or from the toes of the five beloved. By the late eight-

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pain and elimination of sorrow. Some of the hymns used are found on page 201, 202, 720, 783 and 816 – 817 in Guru Granth Sahib.

eenth century the *Khande di pahul* was modified to include all men, women and children who wished to undergo the Khalsa ceremony, but children should initially be given less potent nectar to prepare them for the *Khande di pahul*.<sup>494</sup> The current practice of distributing the nectar prepared with *Japji Sahib* and the dagger to new born children is similarly conducted for the formation of a religious and moral character so they may become “completed” Sikhs and adopt an *Amritdhari* identity in the future.

The preparation of *kirpanvala* and *khandavale* involves several ritual elements believed to produce different transformative powers in the nectars. In both cases it is the recitation of particular *gurbani* hymns that will create and determine the power and affect of *amrit* in the first place. The crucial act to transform orally rendered verses into materialized substances in water is confined in the emic verb compound *bhog lagana*, the act of offering objects to the Guru and thereby sanctifying them. The *granthi* summed up this thinking in one sentence; “Bani makes the *amrit* pure [*shuddh*] and *kirpan* offers it [*bhog lagana*].”<sup>495</sup> An elderly Sikh man verbalized a similar notion when he said: “From the dagger it [*amrit*] gets power and the taste [*ras*] of bani.” The act of stirring the water with the dagger or the sword while reciting *gurbani* accomplishes the substantialization which converts the water into *amrit*. The act is framed by a reading of the *Ardas* in which the preparation is verbally presented as an offering to the Guru.

Although *gurbani* purifies waters, the weapons used in the ritual preparation – the double-edged sword (*khand*) and the dagger (*kirpan*) – have significant instrumental functions and will to a great extent determine the properties of *amrit*. From the time of Guru Gobind Singh “all-steel” (*sarabloh*) was an epithet of God and particularly the *khand* came to represent a divine power and qualities.<sup>496</sup> The use of steel weapons, sanctioned by the Sikh Gurus, is in this ritual context believed to affect the character of the person who drinks the nectar. A middle-aged Sikh woman in Varanasi narrated an anecdote about the first *Khande di pahul* ceremony in 1699 to illustrate the power of the double-edged sword:

When Guru Gobind Singh made the *amrit* in a steel pot, some of it was spilled and eaten by birds. Immediately these birds started to fight. When Mata ji saw the fighting birds she added some sugar crystals (*batasa*) to the *amrit*, so that the Sikhs would become both brave and sweet.

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<sup>494</sup> See Mann 2004: 17 – 19.

<sup>495</sup> The *granthis* sometimes use *bhog lagana* for acts of transforming water into *amrit*, and the act of making people pure by giving them *amrit*. In this sense, *bhog lagana* signified the process of purifying objects or humans. Some interlocutors said they would always dip their dagger in milk or water to purify the substance before drinking. This act also went under the name *bhog lagana*.

<sup>496</sup> In Dasam Granth Guru Gobind Singh invokes God in the form of the *khand* and let “all-steel” signify God.



The Guru's wife added sugar because if the nectar was prepared only by the *khanda* it would make the Singhs overly aggressive warriors. Given the popular notion of an essentially sweet flavour of *gurbani*, both the *kirpanvala amrit* and *khandevala amrit* are always sweetened with hallowed sugar cakes (*batasa*). Just as the Sikh Gurus glorified devotees whose tongues tasted the sweet ambrosial nectar of divine words,<sup>497</sup> the ingestible *amrit* should leave a taste of sweetness in the mouth. The stirring acts of the dagger and the sword, however, is held to strengthen the *amrit* with the essence of steel. The ritual preparation of *amrit* blends to different ingredients – sweetness of *gurbani* and strength of the steel – into a favourable combination. When beneficiaries imbibe this nectar they develop a nature that is compassionate and kind and at the same time brave and fearless as a warrior, in other words, the ideal character of a saint-soldier (*sant-sipahi*). These notions take for granted that ingestion of *amrit* will bring about a bio-moral transformation of humans.

#### ELEMENTS OF POWER

The above examples illustrate that recited *gurbani* is the essential component of *amrit* that will saturate and convert waters into different sacred nectars. More correctly, *amrit* is conceived as *gurbani* verses materialized in ingestible fluids. Drinking of all the *panj banian* associated with an *Amritdhari* identity will consequently produce different effects than ingestions of single lines, just as the spiritual content of hymns will affect the recipient. The sword and the dagger are primarily instruments to accomplish the transformation of waters through an act of offering (*bhog lagana*) and the symbolic values and qualities ascribed to the weapons will exude into the nectars. Besides these elements, the control of space and presence of human agents are other factors that will influence the qualities of different waters. The *Khande di pahul* ceremony, for instance, is always performed in a controlled space within which only *Amritdhari* Sikhs, neophytes and the Guru Granth Sahib are present. The preparation and distribution of *amrit* is conducted by “the five beloved” (*panj pyare*) who represent the first five disciples to undergo the ceremony in 1699 and the community of Sikhs. The presence of the agentive Guru in Guru Granth Sahib and the Guru Panth within a confined space will add to the pure and transformative power of *khandevala amrit*. *Kirpanvala amrit*, on the other hand, does not necessitate the physical presence of Guru Granth Sahib, even if the *granthi* may and often do conduct the preparation seated behind the scripture to make the nectar more powerful.

In Sikh life there are other types of nectars whose qualities depend on the sacred space created. When the unbroken recitation of Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path*) is conducted in private homes families will place an earthen pot or pitcher (*kumb*) filled with water beside the scripture, and sometimes place a coconut tied with a red thread on top of the pitcher.<sup>498</sup> When the forty-eight-hour long recitation comes to an

<sup>497</sup> GGS: 312, 395, 1111.

<sup>498</sup> This custom certainly echoes ritual elements in Hindu rites: a pitcher full of water is placed beside the chief deity and the coconut (in Sanskrit literary “God’s fruit” – *sriphala*) is often said

end the family will treat the water as *Bhog amrit*, or the total accumulation of words in the scripture substantialized in water. A middle-aged Sikh woman said: “When *Akhand path* is going we believe that water turns into *amrit*, the Guru’s words come in it. When the reading is over everyone drinks it.” The women paid careful attention to spatial considerations. The room for the unbroken recitation should be properly cleaned owing to the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, simultaneously as the complete recitation of the scripture would purify the secluded space and atmosphere. The water placed in the midst of the engendered space is believed to absorb the substances of *gurbani* and transform into beneficial nectar to be drunk and sprinkled at the house.

ELEMENTS OF DIFFERENT NECTARS				
NECTAR	CONTENT	INSTRUMENT	SPACE	HUMAN AGENT
<i>Khandevala</i>	<i>Panj banian</i>	Double-edged sword	Defined	<i>Panj pyare</i>
<i>Kirpanvala</i>	<i>Japji Sahib</i>	Dagger	Not defined	<i>Granthi</i>
<i>Raksha amrit</i>	Selected verses	Dagger	Not defined	<i>Granthi</i>
<i>Bhog amrit</i>	<i>Guru Granth</i>	Not specified	Defined	The reciter
<i>Shabad amrit</i>	Selected verses	Not specified	Defined	The reciter
<i>Ganga amrit</i>	Power of human Guru	Not specified	Defined	Sikh congregation

Figure 17.

Another illustrative example of the significance of space is the distribution of *Ganga amrit*, the water from the holy well inside Nichibagh Gurdwara (See Chapter 1). The well stands as a testimony of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s stay in Varanasi. According to the local lore, the Guru made the river Ganga spring forth on this spot and the well water is held to be Ganga water transformed to *amrit* from the Guru’s power. On a daily basis Sikhs bring up water from the well and strain off dirt in a modern water purifier, placed in the courtyard of the gurdwara. Gurdwara visitors usually take a sip of *Ganga amrit* after the customary *matha tekna* before Guru Granth Sahib and collect the nectar in bottles, which they store at the private house or in the shop for purification. A few drops of *Ganga amrit* will purify the family’s ordinary drinking

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to symbolize the deity of worship. The custom is prohibited in the normative Sikh code of conduct. More ardent advocates of normative standards may openly reject the practice by appealing to rational materialistic explanations. One *pracharak* from Punjab, visiting Varanasi in 2000 – 2001 said: “In the old times it was necessary to keep water in a pot, because there were no hand pumps or taps in the houses. If a person felt thirsty while paying respect they could get water from that pot. The lamp was there because these kerosene lamps create much pollution and there was no electric light. But nowadays we have electric light everywhere. There is no need for these practices in the present situation.”

water. An elderly *Amritdhari* woman, for instance, kept a small bottle of water in her shop to cleanse herself and her son after taking food and tea from outside the house. “We get a feeling that we have eaten tasted (*jutha*) food and used tasted cups so we drink it to become pure,” she said. Adduced as an instance of impurity, her son recalled an episode when a relative forced him to cut a non-vegetarian cake with his dagger (*kirpan*). Afterwards he began to feel sick: “I felt like someone was pinning me with a knife. I did not feel good at all. For these reasons we keep *amrit*. If we experience any trouble we collect *Ganga amrit* from Nichibagh.” The transformative power of this nectar is solely generated by the historical miracle of Guru Tegh Bahadur within spatial confines. The well-water does not require the element of *gurbani* or ritual preparations but perpetually store substances of the Guru’s power.

Local concepts and uses of various types of *amrit* thus presume that there are several forces and factors involved in the process of transforming ordinary water to nectar. The most significant element of any nectar is the Gurus’ words which will produce different bio-moral effects on the recipient depending upon which verses or sections of the scripture are recited. A comparison between different nectar shows that considerations of the immediate space around the verbal recitation of *gurbani*, the identity and representation of human agents, and uses of instruments in the preparation will condition the particular qualities which the separate water-nectars assume (See Figure 17). *Khandeivala amrit* is the only nectar which manipulates and gives value to all of these elements in order to activate agentive forces in different ways; through the recited *gurbani*, the double-edged sword, the five Khalsa Sikhs who administer the *amrit*, and the Guru Granth Sahib installed within a purified and controlled space. The nectar prepared will consequently recompose the identity and self of the person who drinks it. What the different types of *amrit* do have in common is that they all presume the essentialist notion of substance transformation. The Gurus’ words and power are transformed to fluids which the devotee ingests to achieve different gains. By drinking *amrit* the individual devotee may shed disorders in social life and improve his or her nature by taking in value-laden substances of the Guru into the body.

### 3.2. KIRTAN – IN TUNE WITH WORDS

That Guru Granth Sahib was intended to be set to music and performed is evident from the content and poetic form of the scripture itself: the text is organized according to the classical musical system of *ragas* and regional folk tunes. Apart from three initial compositions (*Japji Sahib*, *Rahiras Sahib*, *Kirtan Sohila*) and a collection of poems at the end, the major portion of the scripture is arranged in thirty-one *ragas*, different musical modes of both classical and regional kinds, by which the text is indexed. Individual poems are further subdivided into poetic metres and singing styles, such as *Asthapadi*, *Var*, *Ghorian*, which assimilate both classical and folk styles of music. The scripture will even provide detailed musical digits and signs to instruct on the way in which each hymn should be performed.<sup>499</sup> Similar to what Hammarlund (2001) writes about “emancipated music” in Turkey and the Middle East, the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib are rendered as a “poesis” – the effective and aesthetic confluence of verbal (*logos*) and musical (*melos*) components not to be separated.<sup>500</sup>

The overarching term for Sikh devotional music is *Gurbani Sangit*, literally the “music of the Guru’s utterances”, which in devotional settings and speech is referred to as *Kirtan*, “Praises” to the tune of music, or *Shabad kirtan*, “Praises of the Word”. Within the North Indian musical language Sikh *kirtan* falls in the broad category of “light” (*halka*) classical music which fuses music and text into a whole and allows for adoption of popular and folk songs, but still places primacy of word over the musical delivery.<sup>501</sup> Given this pristine combination of sacred words and music, modern Sikh musicologists have often displayed interest for technical aspects of *kirtan* – notations of *ragas*, scales, rhythm, and music signs – which has resulted in several publications that serve as handbooks for performers. As Schreffler (2004) writes, “literature about this music [*gurbani sangit*] is written almost entirely by orthodox sacred musicians, who have concerned themselves primarily with details of music theory.”<sup>502</sup>

If century-long debates in the Islamic world have displayed deep concern for the appropriateness of combining music with divine words of the Koran,<sup>503</sup> discourses within the Sikh community have been preoccupied with the maintenance of the original metrical system laid down in Guru Granth Sahib when *gurbani* and music are fused in performance, the conflation between popular tunes (e.g., film-music) and traditional *ragas*, and the use of modern instruments.<sup>504</sup> Notwithstanding the approval of music in Sikh worship and the metrical sophistication of the scripture itself,

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<sup>499</sup> See e.g. Mansukhani 1982, Gurnam Singh 2001.

<sup>500</sup> Hammarlund 2001: 40.

<sup>501</sup> For definition and characteristic of light classical music, see Qureshi 2006: 47.

<sup>502</sup> Schreffler 2004: 1999.

<sup>503</sup> See Nelson’s (2001) treatise on the *sama* polemic in Egypt.

<sup>504</sup> These questions frequently surfaced discussions in the local community at Varanasi. See Manuel for a discussion on different religious stances related to the adoption of film melodies in Hindu *bhajans*. Briefly he mentions that Sikh orthodoxy strongly discourages the use of film tunes in Sikh *shabad kirtan* (Manuel 1993: 119).

the musical components of *kirtan* should always be subservient to *gurbani*. The Sikh musicologist Mansukhani (1982) recognizes four different types of *kirtan* which reflect the delicate balancing between musical artistry and rendition of *gurbani*: “music-oriented” performances give importance to the technical perfection of music and subordinates verbal aspects; “instrument-oriented” *kirtan* displays skill of instruments; “hymn-oriented” performances focus on correct wording and intonation of *gurbani*, while “discourse-oriented” *kirtan* explains and interprets *gurbani* hymns and pays less attention to melody and rhythm. Although music is the essential element, Sikh musicians should ideally perform for the purpose of rendering and clarifying *gurbani* in an aesthetically appealing way and not merely display musical talent for fame or financial profit. A term like *Gurbani sangit* – “the music of *gurbani*” – underscores that conveyance of the verbal content is paramount in Sikh music. The musical components are vehicles to bring out the flavour of *gurbani* and create religious atmospheres. Music has power to accomplish this. Given this accent on the verbal content, the following sections will introduce the methods by which local performers build up *kirtan* performances to enhance the semantic and poetic properties of *gurbani* and adjust the content of separate verses to different social contexts in order to make the Guru’s teaching relevant and revealing to an audience. First, however, one needs to consider what notions and associations the term *kirtan* may evoke among local Sikhs.

#### “THE FOOD FOR THE SOUL”

What is *kirtan* to religious Sikhs? The answers to this general question may be wide-ranging, considering that each listener will always respond to the music in his or her own way according to inner moods and needs. Keeping this in mind, I will quote a few excerpts from interviews with Sikhs in Varanasi in order to illustrate the various significations Sikhs may attribute to *kirtan*, as a devotional practice, when they are asked to personally explain and interpret the concept in ordinary conversations.

##### 1. A young man

When people are going to the gurdwara, they often think that I have to go to the gurdwara, do *matha tekna*, and then immediately go back. But *kirtan* makes people sit down and spend more the time there. People spend more time with God because of *kirtan*.

##### 2. A young female student

I think when anyone is doing *kirtan* the pronunciation should be correct. Whatever is coming out [in *kirtan* performances] should not only touch the ears but also go into people and touch their hearts.

##### 3. A young man

To make the Guru happy, *kirtan* is the medium to make the Guru happy.

4. *A middle-aged woman*

It is singing the praises of God. Everything is from Guru Granth Sahib ji only, so they [the *ragis*] are trying to bring it out [*gurbani*] in a singing manner. All the things we are reading every day, but when you listen to them it feels nice because you can understand *gurbani* better when it is performed in a singing manner. By this you feel closer to God. By listening to *kirtan* I feel that I am closer to God.

5. *A middle-aged businessman*

*Kirtan* is listening to the *bani* of Guru Granth Sahib ji by singing... it comes by listening. By music we grasp fast, because it is attractive. In Sikhism we say you should sing only the Gurus' *bani*, not anyone else's *bani*.

6. *An elderly man*

It is reciting the name of God. We sing the hymns (*shabads*). The hymns (*shabads*) we take in the musical form, that is *kirtan*. During *nam simran* we take God's name without instruments. That is also *kirtan*, because in that we recite the *shabads*. It does not matter if you have instruments, even without [instruments] it is considered as *kirtan*.

7. *An elderly woman*

*Kirtan* is a feeling that comes in you. It is very hard to explain in words. When we are taking food ... like if a person who cannot speak will eat a good meal, he will not be able to tell the taste of it. It is similar like that. We enjoy, but we are not able to explain it in words. It is another level of language.

8. *An elderly man*

When you sing *gurbani* on stage that is *kirtan*. Then other people can also enjoy it. You make them listen to it. If you are reading at home, for yourself, reciting or reading in your heart, then it is *gurbani*. Just by reading yourself, you benefit. But by doing *kirtan*, you benefit and you also give chance to others to benefit

As these excerpts of interviews illustrate, the main function of *kirtan* is to mediate and clarify *gurbani*. More simplified definitions of *kirtan* would read, "*Gurbani* set to music (*sangit*)", "singing words", or "hymns sung in a musical way", as some of my interlocutors put it. Drawing parallels to Hindu devotional music, people may argue that *bhajans* are man-made music with a verbal content drawn from the "outside", that is, from different sources of poetry, whereas Sikh *kirtan* is solely based on sacred words quoted from the "inside" of Guru Granth Sahib and therefore regarded more spiritual

and genuine. Preserving the original content and form *gurbani* hymns are one of many reasons as to why many Sikhs take up a conservative attitude towards the insertion of popular music in Sikh *kirtan* and generally hold that film tunes and other trendy melodies should be expelled from the devotional scene. The tune and rhythm of a contemporary musical setting should preferably emanate from the poetic metre and form of the scripture. As a vehicle to convey the Gurus' words and teaching, however, *kirtan* is not necessarily viewed as a musical genre to be distinguished from other Indian performance traditions. Quite differently, emic notions of *kirtan* will label it as a distinct worship form which cannot be subsumed within music theories or categories. For a professional *ragi* the staged performance certainly provides an opportunity to display musical skill, but for the audience it is primarily a devotional act to praise God and engage in *gurbani*. Touching upon the literal meaning of *kirtan*, an elderly Sikh woman described the term as way "to praise the qualities of God and whatever God has given to us". As she added, "if *kirtan* comes in you, the Guru will become happy. *Kirtan* is the food for my soul." In the degenerated time of *kaliyug* it is spiritual nourishment and the principal means for worship. One informant (answer 4) drew the parallel to *simran*, the practice of meditating and reciting the divine name. What distinguishes the two worship forms for one another is merely the musical components – the use of instrument and melody in *kirtan* – and participatory aspects. *Simran* is primarily a practice in solitude (except for *nam-simran* programs, see 4.3. this chapter), while *kirtan* is a public event in which the performer and the assembly of Sikhs interact and even merge.

Ultimately the power of *kirtan* lies within the sphere of aesthetic and spiritual experiences. The majority of the respondents paid notice to individual feelings that *kirtan* has the capacity to evoke in an assembly of listeners. One interlocutor (answer 7) even defined *kirtan* in terms of internal feelings that arouse through the language of music. The combination of music and vocal components activates aesthetical forces that kindle the flame for spiritual longing in the human heart and soul and generate a "taste" (*ras*) of the essence of the Guru's words and teaching. In this understanding the experience of *kirtan* is a spiritual experience of intensity and immediacy that transcends ordinary conscious strivings. Sikhs will say they are automatically drawn closer to the worship of God and feel closer to God (answer 4) by listening to *gurbani* set to music. The idiom of *kirtan* as spiritual nourishment, or "food for the soul", attempts to capture this religious experience that simultaneously is emotional, sensual and intuitive.

As a public and shared worship form, *kirtan* is considered to have the advantage of giving all people – literate and illiterate – an equal chance of gaining the spiritual benefits invoked by singing and listening to *gurbani* and, not the least, the enjoyment of that experience. Because of its aesthetical power *kirtan* entices people to go to the gurdwara and dedicate time to devotional practices in the busy hours of everyday life. "If there would not be any *kirtan* in the gurdwara, then there would be no gatherings at all, but when there is *kirtan*, people sit down to listen and go into deep concentration (*samadhi lagana*)," a male respondent said. Expressions of the similar

kind underline that the aesthetical force of *kirtan* virtually makes people sit down even if they do not intend to do so, simply because *kirtan* attracts and “catches people from within”.

### STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION

Staged *kirtan* performances by professional musicians can be arranged at the private house, in the gurdwara, or at some other public place in times of Sikh festivals, ceremonies, or whenever there is a sponsor to organize a religious event. Different types of *kirtan* are today firmly integrated in Sikh rites of passage. For instance, the singing of the composition *Char lavan* is an essential component to stipulate a Sikh marriage and the typical *Vairagi kirtan* is sung after a death of a family member. Occasionally the congregation will arrange *kirtan darbar*, or sessions of *kirtan* during which several groups take turns singing in night-long programs (*rain sabhai*).

The texture of *kirtan* consists of a melodic line (*raga*) which is vocalized by the singer, a musical metre articulated on drum, and a pitch outline of the melody which is reinforced on a portable harmonium. A typical *ragi* ensemble therefore consists of three persons who are responsible for bringing out these three components: the leader who sings and plays on a harmonium; a second person who accompanies with another harmonium, and a third companion who sets the rhythm on tabla. Typically the ensemble appears as a collective group (*jatha*) named after the leader, usually the more experienced performer who, during performances, will be seated in the centre of the group. Although string-instruments (*tanti*) are the traditional Sikh instruments and held to be more suitable for devotional Sikh music because of their ability to produce pure notes, harmonium and tabla – the former a European instrument introduced in India during the nineteenth century – have become conventional for *kirtan* performances today. The *ragi jatha* sit on a platform lower than the Guru Granth Sahib facing the congregation.

Considering that the verbal content of *gurbani* is paramount in Sikh *kirtan* the formal elements of performances can be identified by poetic rather musical terms. The rhythmic patterns of hymns derived from the Guru Granth Sahib will guide the overall structure of the musical setting, including the length, proportions, and number of sections. Acoustically the performer will bring out the text with clarity by placing emphasis on salient features of the chosen *gurbani* hymn. A common pattern is to build up a song structure with complementary sections of refrain (*sthai*) and crescendo (*antara*). Poems in the Sikh scripture are divided into units with numeral digits after each line and intersections with refrain lines which carry the central idea of a hymn and are to be sung after each verse. In *kirtan* the performers will therefore start with the refrain line (*sthai*) and repeat it after each completed verse in successive order according to the poetic structure of the hymn (See Figure 18). The musical contrast between refrain and verse in repeated sequences serves to underscore complementarity between statements and answers. The refrain line represents stability of the poem and the verse allows for excursions that will move the listeners to new under-



standings and experiences of *gurbani* in a dynamic and escalating process. Apart for this basic structure the *ragi jatha* may insert parallel quotations of other *gurbani* lines to amplify meanings of the hymns sung and let the tabla performer provide musical interludes.

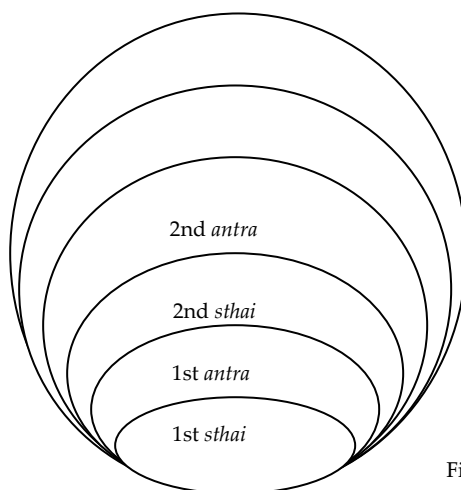


Figure 18.

The aim of the performer is to create a spiritual atmosphere and incite moods (*ras*) in the interaction with an audience. Musically this is accomplished by structuring each performance on a particular *raga* or melodic line which is believed to produce a feeling appropriate for the particular event. The flavour which an individual *raga* exudes is regarded appropriate for certain times of the day, seasons of the year, or particular occasions in the human social life.<sup>505</sup> In North Indian classical music and regional traditions the *ragas* and the specific emotions and moods ascribed to each melodic measure are numerous. "All the *ragas* constitute a very big family and if a musician wants to get to know all of them he will become very old. When he is near to reaching them he will be dead," a local *ragi* said. A purist interpretation would maintain that Guru Arjan paid careful attention to the tune in which *gurbani* hymns were sung, confirming that each *raga* evoked the same emotions as the content of the hymn, and instructed the *ragis* to sing in a manner that would enhance the aesthetic and spiritual experience of *gurbani*.<sup>506</sup> More orthodox Sikh performers would therefore argue that each hymn set to music in *kirtan* should strictly follow the thirty-one *raga* patterns given in Guru Granth Sahib to evoke the moods intended by the Guru. In practice, however, adherence to the metrical system in the scripture always depends on the choice and knowledge of the individual performer. A standard method

<sup>505</sup> For studies on the Raga system in North Indian Classical Music, consult Gangoly 1948, Danielou 1968, Kaufmann 1968, Jairazbhoy 1995.

<sup>506</sup> Singh, Bhai Vir 1958.

among the local *ragis* I interviewed was to employ a selected numbers of *ragas* and tunes for hymns they sing in the daily services and in other performances more freely combine verses with various *ragas* to make the musical presentation of *gurbani* more attractive to listeners.<sup>507</sup> For example, a *gurbani* hymn written in *Rag Todi* in the Guru Granth Sahib can be performed in another *raga* which is not included in the scripture, just as a verse not structured after *Rag Todi* can be sung in that melodic measure. More experimental uses of a large number of melodic measures require skill in classical music. I was told that only those who are “masters of *ragas*” and exceptionally talented in the *raga*-system are able to select from a variety of melodic modes to enhance emotions adjusted to the precise temporal and spatial circumstances. The ordinary *ragi* performer, on the other hand, must always regulate the performance to the taste of the audience and continually improvise with the musical components to create interest in *gurbani*. An elderly *ragi jatha* leader in Varanasi explained:

When I perform *kirtan* I always watch the audience, the *sangat*, if they are getting [*gurbani*] it or not. I have been involved in this since childhood so by now I understand what the audience likes. We use those styles which the congregation can understand. Sometimes I will mix three to four *ragas* just to make the *kirtan* more attractive. Sometimes I use outside tunes [popular music]. The congregation likes it. When they become interested then I can tell them that I will sing a *gurbani* hymn in the same *raga* as mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib ji. We have to do like this. If I sense that the congregation is not getting my *kirtan*, then I stop and explain what I am singing. I give an explanation to the hymn. Then they will understand and enjoy.

The profession necessitates a *ragi* to be sensitive to the context and never let his musical interest or skill take over a performance designed for rendition of *gurbani*. To freely choose and conflate appropriate *ragas* and folk tunes is, on the other hand, the means to creating an aesthetic language through which people may enjoy, understand, and “taste” the spiritual flavour of *gurbani*, even experience connectedness with the divine. He will therefore adjust the musical modes and tunes to the receptivity of the congregation.

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<sup>507</sup> A local *ragi jatha* in Varanasi divided the day into three periods during which they used the following measures: in the morning (4 am to 8 am) *Rag Asa*, *Rag Bhairo*, *Rag Bhariwi*, *Rag Todi*; in the daytime (10 am to 12) *Rag Sarang*, *Rag Kaufi*, *Rag Bindra*, *Rag Berasi*, *Rag Basant*; and in the evening (7 pm to 12) *Rag Kaliyan*, *Rag Jamma*, *Rag Madhwanti*, *Rag Jajwanti*, *Rag Kalavati*. For a more detailed division of *ragas* in Sikh *kirtan*, see Mansukhani 1982.

## DAILY SERVICES

In a gurdwara there are generally four different so-called *chaunki* – “periods” or services of *kirtan* which the *ragis* are to perform daily. The number of services has changed over time and at important Sikh sites, such as the historical places like Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar, there might have been between five to nine sessions.<sup>508</sup> In Varanasi the *ragis* answer for three *chaunkis* that are carried out at fixed times in a day and aim to convey particular *gurbani* compositions: in the early morning hour they will sing the hymn *Asa di var*, at sunset *Rahiras Sahib*, and just before the reading the *Sukhasan* ceremony there is another session called *Arti*. *Reharas Sahib* is the hymn which *Amritdhari* Sikhs are obliged to recite daily at sunset and has already been discussed in a previous section of this chapter. In the gurdwara the *ragi* will melodiously sing the whole composition during a *chaunki* which is scheduled for 6 pm and takes about thirty minutes to complete. The performances of the other two compositions – *Asa di Var* and *Arti* – should be briefly commented upon.

*Asa di Var* is a ballad (*var*) comprising of twenty-four rhyming *pauris* or stanzas of Guru Nanak, each of which are preceded by two or more smaller poems (*shlokas*) by Guru Nanak and Guru Angad that in terms of content and form are placed in a dialectic relationship to the stanza.<sup>509</sup> As the name reveals, Guru Nanak composed the hymn in the popular heroic measure of a ballad (*var*), and the text was later on organized under *Rag Asa* in the Sikh scripture. As prescribed in the opening of the ballad, it should be performed in the so-called *Tunde Asraje ki dhuni* – a particular regional folk tune (*dhuni*), named after the legendary King As who had one of his arms amputated as result of a false allegation by his step-mother and consequently was called the cripple (*tunda*).<sup>510</sup> A legend tells that court-poets composed heroic ballads in a special tune to praise the pious deeds of King As. The style became a popular folk tune in the Punjab, which Guru Arjan adopted for the composition *Asa di var*.

In the gurdwaras of Varanasi *Asa di var* is the first composition the *ragis* perform in the morning subsequent to the congregational reading of *Sukhmani Sahib* and the

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<sup>508</sup> According to Pashaura Singh, there were eight *chaunkis* of *kirtan* at Harimandir Sahib from the time of Guru Arjan up to the nineteenth century, whereas today there are normally five *kirtan* sessions (Pashaura Singh 2000: 141 – 142). Gurnam Singh (2001: 19) mentions nine *chaunkis* at Harimandir Sahib.

<sup>509</sup> In total *Asa di Var* contains fifty-nine verses, out of which Guru Angad has composed fifteen and the remaining part is by Guru Nanak. *Asa di Var* is included on page 462 – 475 in Guru Granth Sahib.

<sup>510</sup> According one legend in ancient times As was the son of King Sarang. The step-mother of As, who was the second wife of the King Sarang, fell in love with As and accused him of incest when she was refused by him. To punish As the King ordered his execution, but a minister decided to cut off one of his hands and leave him in the jungle. A group of traders found As and sold him to a washer man as a slave. When King Sarang died without an heir the minister decided to make the first one who passed through the city gates the following morning successor of the throne. As was the first person to enter and consequently he ascended the throne under the name “the cripple King As” (*Tunda Asraja*).

reading of the Sikh supplication. The *kirtan* of *Asa di Var* usually starts at 6 in the morning and takes up to two hours to complete, depending upon how the main *ragi* will punctuate the singing with verbal expositions of the ballad. As one performer emphasized, it is the *ragis* duty to explicate the semantic content of *Asa di Var* to the audience and simultaneously sing the stanzas in a mode that will generate enthusiastic moods:

Through *Asa di Var* Guru ji has given us a teaching. We try to make the *sangat* realize that they are lucky that they have come to the shelter of the Guru and the benefits they gain from the being a congregation of the Guru. We try to sing *Asa di Var* in a challenging way, give people the feeling of excitement (*josh ras*) that will make them understand the Guru's teaching.

To satisfy the semantic and aesthetic aspects in performance the *ragi* will divide the compositions into six "sets" or sextets (*chakkas*) in each of which four stanzas of *Asa di Var* is melodiously sung. In addition the performer will prelude each stanza with a separate quatrain in the metre of *chhand*, written by Guru Ramdas and derived from another location in Guru Granth Sahib. *Chhand* is a popular folk metre which means "praise" and thus signifies sacred hymns which carries praises of God.<sup>511</sup> The twenty-four quatrains of Guru Ramdas are used to glorify and epitomize the essence of the twenty-four stanzas of *Asa di Var* in which Guru Nanak teaches on the state of humans and how to conquer vices and seek liberation and union with God. The first "set" of a performance will therefore begin with the first quatrain by Ramdas and the first stanza of *Asa di Var*, followed by the second quatrain and stanza, in the same order until four sets of verses are completed. He will follow this pattern of stratifying singing sets of four quatrains and stanzas until all of the twenty-four stanzas are completed. To optimize and illustrate central ideas and meanings of *Asa di Var* the *ragi* will further interpose the singing with other shorter hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib after each completed set (See Figure 19). These accompanying hymns are chosen freely and provide the performer an opportunity for exegesis. A local *ragi* said he often selected *gurbani* verses which praise the grandeur (*mahima*) of God and treat the theme of *darshan*, or auspicious sight, which in this context was explicated as the favourable appropriation of knowledge through the Gurus' teaching that will grant success. In a similar fashion, the *ragi* may bring into focus a specific topic for interpretation of *Asa di Var* in order to clarify subtler meanings and generate an expanding process of change in the thoughts of listeners. The musical components may also vary. Although *Asa di Var* is based on *Rag Asa*, the composition can be performed in other *ragas* ascribed the capacity to evoke the right mood in the morning hours. The *ragis* in Varanasi used to alternate the morning *ragas* *Asa*, *Bilawal*, *Todi* and *Bhairav*.

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<sup>511</sup> The quatrains used for *Asa di Var* performances are written in *Rag Asa* on page 448 – 451 in the Guru Granth Sahib.

Whichever of these *ragas* they selected, the twenty-four quatrains and stanzas were always performed in the same musical mode, while other tunes and melodies were used for the other interspersed *gurbani* hymns in order to capture the attention of the audience.

THE STRUCTURE OF <i>ASA DI VAR</i> PERFORMANCES	
Set 1:	a) quatrain 1, stanza 1, quatrain 2, stanza 2, quatrain 3, stanza 3, quatrain 4, stanza 4 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib
Set 2:	a) q. 5, s. 5, q. 6, s. 6, q. 7, s. 7, q. 8, s. 8 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib
Set 3:	a) q. 9, s. 9, q. 10, s. 10, q. 11, s. 11, q. 12, s. 12 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib
Set 4:	a) q. 13, s. 13, q. 14, s. 14, q. 15, s. 15, q. 16, s. 16 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib
Set 5:	a) q. 17, s. 17, q. 18, s. 18, q. 19, s. 19, q. 20, s. 20 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib
Set 6:	a) q. 21, s. 21, q. 22, s. 22, q. 23, s. 23, q. 24, s. 24 b) Freely chosen hymn from Guru Granth Sahib

Figure 19.

*Arti chaunki*, or the *kirtan* session in which the *ragi* perform a compilation of hymns called *Arti*, begins close to 7 pm in the gurdwara. In Hindu and Jain worship the term *Arti* signifies the ritual act of circulating an oil-lamp in a clockwise direction before an icon or picture of a deity. The lamp is held with both hands and moved to create a circle in the air at the same time as another person rings a bell. Businessmen in Varanasi city normally end the day by doing a more small-scaled variation of *Arti* ceremony with a fire outside the shop to procure divine protection over the night. Perhaps the most spectacular enactment of the ceremony in the city is the daily *Arti* to river Ganga (*Ganga Arti*) which is staged at the Dashashwamedh Ghat and Assi Ghat after sunset and usually attracts a large crowd of devotees and spectators.

Considering that idol-worship is rejected in Sikhism, the ceremony is not to be conducted within the gurdwara. The present Sikh code of conduct and Sikh reform-ists strongly prohibit *Arti* on the motive that it is principally a Hindu practice that crept into Sikh worship due to Brahminical influences. Hindu mahants who were in charge of Sikh gurdwaras before the Gurdwara Reform Movement in the 1920s would perform *Arti* before the installed Guru Granth Sahib as a part of the evening ceremony. Modern Sikh interpretations would argue that *gurbani* discard the formal ritual to stress the importance of true devotion. Guru Nanak, for instance, would let ritual elements of the Hindu practice of *Arti* – the plate, lamp, incense, and bells – stand as metaphors for the whole divine creation and human adoration thereof. When Sikhs are speaking of *Arti* today they generally refer to a set of hymns culled from the writing of Ravidas, Sain, Kabir, Dhanna, complemented with verses from

the Dasam Granth, which utilize similar allegories.<sup>512</sup> Instead of waving lamps before a manifestation of a supernatural power as the final stage of worship, the Sikhs will sing these hymns in successive order at the end of the evening liturgy.<sup>513</sup> Thus the verses, which use linguistic images derived from a Hindu ritual to articulate devotion and praises of God, are now sung every night at the gurdwara as a typical Sikh ceremony. The *ragi* may insert additional *gurbani* verses to the performance, but the singing of the collection of verses called *Arti* will conclude the daily service of *kirtan*.<sup>514</sup>

#### INVOKING GOD AND EVOKING MOODS

When the *ragi* ensemble is seated on the dais the leader begins the performance with an instrumental prelude in which he plays the tune of the *raga* for a few minutes to create an atmosphere. Then comes a brief moment of contemplation during which the performer will utter his *mangalcharan* or introductory invocation. *Mangalcharan*, literally an “auspicious undertaking”, signifies an opening panegyric, song, verse or prayer, often directed to a divine being for success, that begins a play, poem or ceremony in Indian performances. As Lutgendorf (1991) points out, in both religious and secular performances *mangalcharan* functions as a cultural “performance marker” – “a sign to the audience of the moment of transition into the performance frame.”<sup>515</sup> In the context of Sikh devotional music, *mangalcharan* consists of a small *shalok* or a few lines derived from Guru Granth Sahib. It is equally common to call this prelude by the name of *dandaut*, a noun that signifies the bodily act of saluting by a full prostration.<sup>516</sup> The utterance of *mangalcharan* is a speech act which is attributed several meanings. First of all it is an act to praise and invoke God and submit oneself to a divine power. By praising God the divine is invited to assist the performance. “I say to God, you are full of all qualities. Save me from unsteadiness, so my mind will not go here and there,” a local *ragi* in Varanasi explained. Performers often emphasize that they are merely “instruments” for the conveyance of *gurbani* and the *mangalcharan* allows them to take permission of God and appeal for support in the devotional enterprise. The utterance is seen as an act of submission. “It is to place your self at the feet of the Guru”, one performer said. The *mangalcharan* will also create a short moment during which the *ragi* is able to settle his mind and create the appropriate bent for *gurbani*. One *ragi* said the opening stanza was as a way to “get involved in God” by engaging in the words of the Gurus. It is a kind of meditation that domesticates the performer’s

<sup>512</sup> The hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib are found of page 694 (Ravidas), 695 (Sain), 1350 (Kabir), and 695 (Dhanna). The verses from Dasam Granth consist of three *sawaiye* on page 79, 495, 254, and two *dohra* on page 254 and 79. See *Amrit Kirtan*, p. 835.

<sup>513</sup> Within the structure of the evening liturgy the singing of *Arti* occurs before the *granthi* will read the Sikh supplication (*Ardas*) and commence the *Sukhasan* ceremony.

<sup>514</sup> One verse of Kabir, which is said to be particularly designed for *Arti*, is inserted after the singing of Dhanna’s hymn. The verse appears on page 656 in Guru Granth Sahib.

<sup>515</sup> Lutgendorf 1991: 183.

<sup>516</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 396.

mind and affects the audience's perception of *gurbani*. A *ragi* whose inner self is fully devoted has the capacity to bring out the essence of *gurbani* and make listeners more perceptible for the sacred words. The musical conveyance should touch their souls and not just the ears. *Mangalcharan* is a means to mentally and spiritually prepare the performer in his duty to enhance the religious experience of the audience.

Each *ragi* is free to choose an individual *mangalcharan* as long as it is a verse or line derived from Guru Granth Sahib. Aspiring *ragis* normally learn how to select *mangalcharan* during their musical education at Sikh institutes or under guidance of a senior tutor. Some of the musicians I spoke with had chosen *mulmantra* for this purpose or used verses which contained nouns and verbs that would identify the rendition as a respectful greeting, such as the following example:

I make obeisance [*namaskar*] and prostration [*bandna*] to Thee and many  
a time am a sacrifice unto Thee.<sup>517</sup>

To sing a verse in which Gurus speak of their act of submission to God the *ragis* said they surrendered themselves to the divine before the actual performance. Some presented other hymns by which they asked for forgiveness in advance for mistakes they would make unintentionally. A younger *ragi* leader, for instance, used a particular *mangalcharan* in which he pleaded for divine grace to perform *kirtan* correctly:

O Merciful to the meek I have entered Thy sanctuary. Thou, O great  
cherisher of the universe, art an ocean of happiness. Show mercy that  
Nanak may sing Thine praises and thus preserve my honour.<sup>518</sup>

After completing the introductory invocation the performer will use different methods to measure the mood of the audience and create a religious and alert atmosphere for the musical session. The leader of the *ragi jatha* may lead the congregation in an antiphonal melodious *simran*, or chanting of the divine name, in which he will sing the *gurmantra* "Vahiguru" and the audience respond by repeating it. When *kirtan* is performed for a special ceremony or social gathering he may attempt to evoke suitable moods in the audience by singing a few *gurbani* hymns with propositional meanings that touch upon the theme of the event. In case the performers are to do *kirtan* within the framework of a death ceremony, for instance, they will pick out one or several lines from a hymn that semantically relates to the topic of loss or separation. An elderly *ragi* leader in Varanasi used to sing the following lines of Kabir when he performed *kirtan* in connection with a death ceremony:

Kabir, death, of which the world is terrified, is pleasing unto my mind;  
it is in death alone, that one is blessed with the perfect supreme bliss.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>517</sup> GGS: 820.

<sup>518</sup> GGS: 105.

By singing these lines he wanted to draw the audience's attention to the subject of death and make them realize that all will die one day, he said. Similarly, on happy occasions like weddings or birthday parties the same *ragi* extracted *gurbani* lines that contained keywords or themes appropriate for the particular events. In times of marriage he preferred some of the many compositions in which the Gurus let the passionate love between a young bride and her husband stand as a metaphor for the affectionate relationship between God and humans. Motifs of meeting and unification were particularly significant in this context. Experienced performers may store a repertoire of memorized lines to be evoked in various performance situations or consult handbooks on *gurbani* for assistance in selecting a suitable line.<sup>520</sup> In either case the referential content of the chosen hymn should in some way or another link up with a theme or situation for which *kirtan* is conducted. The verse sung should introduce and invite the audience to the topic of the performance that will follow.

The main section of a *kirtan* program may follow various musical rules and structures depending upon the poetic forms of the hymns rendered and the individual style of performers. A key rule for a successful performance, however, is the *ragi*'s ability to adapt the selection of *gurbani* verses and the choice of *raga* to a particular context in order to evoke moods and processes of reflection among the audience. A *ragi* performer in Varanasi illustrated the need for context-sensitiveness and improvisations by *Vairagi kirtan*, the music performed when mourning families organize the last prayer for a deceased family member (See Chapter 4). A natural death at an old age does not involve the same grief as when a young person passes away, and consequently he would for the latter context perform hymns specifically aimed to give the mourners relief. The life-work and moral character of the dead would also influence the choice of verses. In cases where the deceased had a good and religious nature he would bring up a hymn in which Kabir tells people not to cry for the dead because they have returned home to their real home.<sup>521</sup> If the deceased was a drunkard of less popularity in society he would instead emphasize another line in the same hymn about how humans are gifted with intellect but forget God and do things that create sadness in the world. In both instances he combined three to four *ragas* that had the capacity to generate feelings of peace and sadness. Within the song structure he would also insert a general discourse on the universal truth of death based on another verse from Guru Granth Sahib, because "our duty is to keep the congregation attached to *gurbani*", he said.

To mark the end of *kirtan* the performer may sing a freely chosen line or verse from the Guru Granth Sahib. In case the performance will be followed by the reading of the *Ardas* and distribution of *karah prashad*, the *ragi jatha* will sing the first five

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<sup>519</sup> GGS: 1365.

<sup>520</sup> Such as Piara Singh Padam's book *Guru Granth Vichar Kosh* (1998), in which excerpts of hymns are quoted and indexed under specific topics.

<sup>521</sup> Kabir's hymns in *Rag Maru* are considered proper for *Vairagi kirtan*.



verses and the fortieth verse of the composition *Anand Sahib* together with the assembly.

### PRAISES FOR ALL

As a mode of rendering devotion to God by singing praises, *kirtan* is open to all and not restricted to the domain of professional musicians. The following chapter will illustrate that various types of improvised devotional singing by the laity are firmly embedded in the structure of Sikh festivals and ceremonies. For forty days prior to anniversaries of Guru Nanak, for example, the Sikhs will go out in morning processions (*prabhatferi*) singing verses from the Guru Granth Sahib headed by a Sikh standard. The children are strongly encouraged to perform *kirtan* alone or accompanied by adults and have created different *kirtan* groups in the city. On festivals days the congregation allow them to display their skill in public.

Local Sikhs generally distinguish between two types of songs in lay performances of *kirtan*: *dhanya* (Sanskrit) or *dhan* (Punjabi) which are accolades that serve to glorify the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scripture to folk tunes; and *sangat kirtan*, or “congregational praises” which are *gurbani* hymns set to music. A popular song in the first category starts with the line “*Dhanya hai, dhanya hai, dhanya hai, Guru Nanak Dev ji dhanya hai*”, which is repeated twice, and then continues to successively name all the ten Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib, the Khalsa community, and finally the holy congregation of Sikhs.<sup>522</sup> While singing the last line – eulogizing the Sikh *sangat* – all participants turn their heads to the left and right, and by looking at each other salute and pay respect to the congregation they themselves embody.

*Sangat kirtan* may consist of freely selected *gurbani* verses that are sung to various melodies and tunes. At the time of my fieldwork a group of lay Sikhs met every Sunday between 6 and 9 at night to perform *sangat kirtan* in the gurdwara. Men, women, and children would seat themselves on the floor beside the scriptural throne and install *Amrit Kirtan*, a compilation with four thousand selected *gurbani* verses, on book stands. They would start the program by chanting the divine name (*Vahiguru*) for a couple of minutes into microphones and then take turns in leading the assembly. The leader would freely choose a separate *gurbani* verse that he or she read in full from *Amrit Kirtan* so participants could recognize the words and rhyming, and then start singing the same verse to improvised music. Like other renditions of *gurbani* the purity of each line and phrase should always be maintained. The instruments used for these and similar *Kirtan* sessions by the laity are harmonium, cymbals, small drums (*dholki*), and tongs with jingling metal discs (*chimta*). The singing methods are various: the leader may first sing a single line as a key refrain or the whole verse line by line, and then let the entire congregation form the alternate chorus which responds by repeating the line or verse. The leader can also choose to sing odd lines of the verse and let the congregation sing even lines, or alternate the singing between male

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<sup>522</sup> I was told that this song was created by Sant Isher Singh at Lhalla Sahib in Ludhiana.

and female devotees - the leader sings a line which a group of women or men repeat in chorus. At the end of the program all will chant the name *Vahiguru* and let the tunes and rhymes of the instruments fade away to immerse participants in repetition and remembrance of the divine name. Like all Sikh ceremonies the meditative repetition is broken with the Sikh salutation and Khalsa ovation which marks the end of the program.

### 3.3. KATHA – EXPOUNDING THE TEACHING

Guru Ramdas once said to one of his disciples: ‘If you want to receive *darshan* of the real Guru then you should go through the *pothi* [book] which is placed over there on a palanquin. If you do *matha tekna* 100 times, or go around the *pothi* 500 times, you will not benefit from it. You have to read the *pothi* and try to understand it. Only then will you get *darshan* of the true Guru and God.

The story was told by a middle-aged *ragi*-performer in Gurubagh Gurdwara. He used to do shorter oral expositions of *gurbani* as a part of his musical performance in the daily morning and evening liturgy. The point he aimed to communicate in the course of our conversation was that one should distinguish between ritualized veneration to the scriptural body of Guru Granth Sahib and its interior which stores knowledge and teaching of God. It is not enough to pay respect to Guru Granth Sahib and recite *gurbani* but one should try to understand and implement the teachings in one’s own life. As he concluded, the real difference between empty and meaningless ritualism and true devotional practices does not lie in the actual performance of rituals to the Guru Granth Sahib, but in the ways by which disciples devote themselves and engage with the semantic inner of the scripture. Some people will just imitate the ritual behaviour of others “like blind sheep”, he said, while others perform the same acts with true devotion and for the purpose of pursuing knowledge and guidance of the Guru.

For religious Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib appears like a seamless and cohesive world of meanings. The sacred scripture is a collection of the Gurus’ teaching and praises which should be interpreted and reflected upon. Local Sikhs make acquaintance with the interior teaching of Guru Granth Sahib through daily recitations and emphasize that reciting without grasping the teaching within the texts is a valueless enterprise. Oral reproductions of *gurbani*, however, are often executed in a too rapid and formalized way to impart knowledge to listeners who are not already familiar with the scripture. People learn how to recite and enounce *gurbani* words, while locutionary meanings of the scripture pose quite a different challenge. The linguistic and allegorical wealth of the Guru Granth Sahib invites interpretations and commentaries, but common people will sometimes find the language and content of the text hard

to understand. Because of the scripture's authority many fear the risk of making incorrect interpretations and believe that only those who are graced the divine gift of knowledge will fully understand the spiritual meanings. To a large number of Sikhs the popular means to explore the semantic inner of Guru Granth Sahib and other hymns credited *gurbani* status will instead be through the listening of performances of *katha*, the methodical "story-telling" or exposition of sacred texts delivered in the Punjabi or Hindi language. In Punjabi the noun *katha* stands for a "story" that is told in both secular and religious contexts, in the latter case translated into a "sermon", "religious discourse" or "oral exegesis".<sup>523</sup> In Sikh worship the notion of *katha* has come to signify oral exposition commenced within the contexts of devotional gatherings in the gurdwara and which generally presumes the presence of a *kathakar*, or a specialist "exegete", who delivers an oral interpretation on *gurbani* and the Sikh history to a listening audience.

In the daily run of a gurdwara *katha* is usually a separate item after the daily morning liturgy. The performer will take a seat on a dais beside the scriptural throne and tailor a discourse from a line or theme raised in the Guru Granth Sahib within a prefixed limit of time. On festival days local and regional orators are invited to deliver stories on Sikh ethics, history, and other topics appropriate for the occasion of celebration. Occasionally the local community stages large-scale performances exclusively for oral discourses (*katha darbar*) to give the congregation an opportunity to hear a selection of renowned expounders for one or more days. In February 2001, for instance, the Sikhs in Varanasi organized a three day long program with the late "star" *kathakar* Giani Sant Singh Maskin who flew in from Rajasthan accompanied with eight groups of Sikh musicians (*ragi jatha*) and two *kathakar* of national fame.<sup>524</sup> The venue for these expositions is always the *sangat*, or the holy congregation of devotees, and the "stories" being told aims at unfolding moral and spiritual meanings in the Gurus' teaching that are not readily comprehensible to the audience.

## DEVOTIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEVICES

The tradition of performing *katha* on sacred texts is an historical and pan-Indian phenomenon, conceived both as a form of entertainment and an efficacious means for religious worship and education, sometimes used for political propaganda.<sup>525</sup> To

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<sup>523</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 189.

<sup>524</sup> After his death Giani Sant Singh Maskin was honored with the title *Gurmat Vidya Martand*, literally "The Sun of Knowledge of the Guru's teaching", by the SGPC. *The Tribune*, 2005-03-04.

<sup>525</sup> In a comprehensive ethnographic study of living *katha* performances of *Ramcharitmanas* in Northern India, Lutgendorf (1991) analyzes the historical, social and economic contexts of *katha* performers and performances and offers detailed descriptions of the narrative techniques used. Lutgendorf traces the tradition of *katha* to Vedic times, stating that the milieu for oral exegesis emerged already in the Brahmana literature and fully developed as a practice of religious "story-telling" in Puranic times. For an anthology of different types of *katha* performances of the *Ramayana* story in different regions, see K. S. Singh & Birendranath 1993. In Maharashtra and

listen or to cause others to listen to an oral exposition of sacred texts have been traditional means to express and cultivate love for a supernatural being and the performance art occurs in vast numbers of devotional contexts in the Indian religions. In the Sikh tradition the concept and practice of *katha* can be traced back to the period of the Sikh Gurus. Their hymns in Guru Granth Sahib frequently employ the term to signify both the means and the end of human spiritual quests. The reading, chanting, listening, and meditating upon "the story of God" (*hari katha*) and "the ambrosial story" (*amrit katha*) stand for devotional practices through which devotees may remove bad karma and appropriate divine knowledge.<sup>526</sup> The active partaking in a discourse on God in the company of co-devotees is a worship act that will bestow merits both on the narrator and the listener.

In Sikh congregations it was the Gurus' hymns that were to be recited, sung, and explicated. As Pashuara Singh (2000) writes, the oral exegesis of the sacred poetry begun in the milieu of the Sikh Gurus: "The devotional singing of *gurbani* was normally followed by the Guru's spontaneous oral interpretation of the meaning of a particular scriptural passage."<sup>527</sup> Textual sources bear witness of an early interest to give commentaries and expound on the teaching of the Sikh Gurus. The tradition firmly maintains that the scribe Bhai Gurdas (1558 – 1637) was the first major "exegete" who at the turn of the sixteenth century presented expositions of Sikh doctrines in writing. Since Bhai Gurdas was the authorized scribe and closely associated with the Gurus, his commentaries are by religious Sikhs treated as an interpretive "key" to unlock true understanding of *gurbani*. The canonization of the Sikh scripture in the late seventeenth century encouraged the introduction of on-going oral and written commentaries on the Guru Granth Sahib. Pashuara Singh identifies seven indigenous Sikh schools of interpreting *gurbani* (*gurbani dian viakhia parnalian*) in writing which have approached the scriptural content differently depending on tradition and historical context. The schools have used various methods that involve everything from literal translation of particular words to more elaborate exegesis that attempt to disclose subtler spiritual meanings of hymns.<sup>528</sup> The *janam-sakhi* literature and the *gurbilas* testify the existence of narrative traditions that aimed to glorify the Sikh Gurus and impart narrative settings for *gurbani* hymns by way of interchanging biographical

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Karnataka Damle (1960) examines the tradition of *harikatha* – narrated stories based on stanzas from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, or expositions of devotional texts composed by Hindu saint poets – as a well-systemized form of communicating moral principles, political ideas, and social norms in the context of traditional culture.

<sup>526</sup> GGS: 95, 118, 386, 404, 587, 996, 1294.

<sup>527</sup> Pashaura Singh 2000: 270.

<sup>528</sup> The four standard exegetical methods which Pashaura Singh mentions provide meanings and synonyms of words (*shabadarath*), annotations on particular hymns (*tika*), detailed exegesis and interpretations on hymns (*viakhia*), and sublime meanings of hymns (*paramarath*). Pashuara Singh 2000:240. Gurnek Singh (1998) exemplifies the method of annotations (*tika*) and exegesis (*viakhia*) of *gurbani* in modern Sikh literature.

anecdotes with quoted hymns.<sup>529</sup> One can presume that a creative oral retelling of stories on the Sikh Gurus and expounding on *gurbani* hymns was a key feature of Sikh worship and operated parallel to the written narrative and exegetical traditions.

At the present the notion of *katha* evokes associations to a variety of practices. On auspicious days in the calendar, such as the full-moon day, Sikh women may observe a “fast” (*vrat*) that implies abstinence from water, food, or particular types of food, and recite a story on Guru Nanak (*puranmashi katha*).<sup>530</sup> The “sacrifice” of the fast in combination with the oral rendering of the narrative is used as a means to procure protection and blessings for themselves and family members. In domestic settings anecdotes on the lives of the Sikhs Gurus are continually re-told to children for didactical purposes. In times of disorder and emotional distress, such as after the death of a beloved family member, people will seek comfort and peace in oral renditions of these stories. *Katha* can exist in ordinary discussions and conversations as well. Sikhs who have appropriated large portions of the Guru Granth Sahib through memorization tend to employ a formulaic and proverbial use of stanzas from the scripture and anecdotes of the Gurus’ lives. Whenever they are to illustrate and legitimize subjective standpoints, moral deliberations and interpretations in ordinary discussions they automatically quote *gurbani* stanzas and tap anecdotes on the Sikh Gurus from their resources of memorized texts.<sup>531</sup>

On a daily basis the *granthi* is responsible for a creative expanding of the Sikh scripture to community members as he is expected to interpret the hymn which constitutes the *Hukam* and verses that occur in other worship acts. In a stricter sense of the word, however, *katha* refers to the oral exegesis staged as a performance in the gurdwara by professional Sikh exegetes or musicians. The local *ragi jatha* play a vital role in keeping the *katha* tradition alive by integrating expositions of *gurbani* in the daily performances of devotional music. The leader of the group may first sing a line or hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied with music. He will then bring a central theme into focus and clarify spiritual and moral meanings of the content. To support his interpretation the *ragi* may refer to other passages in the Guru Granth Sahib and summarize anecdotes from the lives of saint-poets and devout Sikh disciples. The alternation between formal renderings of stanzas and vocal expositions is, as we shall see, a standard method of revealing the semantic properties of *gurbani*.

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<sup>529</sup> As McLeod observes, listening to stories about Guru Nanak was regarded by the *janam-sakhi* narrators as way to attain liberation (McLeod 1980a: 106 ff).

<sup>530</sup> On *vrat* and the stories (*vrat katha*) related to the ritual discipline in the Hindu tradition, see McGee 1991, Pearson 1996, Menzies 2004.

<sup>531</sup> As I experienced in many interview situations with Sikh performers, an ordinary conversation on a religious topic often turns into a *katha*-like discourse in which the speaker will cite a line of reference from Guru Granth Sahib and tell anecdotes from the lives of the Sikh Gurus. The punch line of the story will epitomize his or her subjective positions or interpretations.

The cornerstone of *katha* is devotion. To tell and listen to stories about God and the Sikh Gurus and expounding the teaching in the scripture, are devotional acts believed to endow knowledge for spiritual progress. For religious Sikhs the message of Guru Granth Sahib is conceived as universal and timeless, and it is the ongoing process of interpretations by knowledgeable Sikhs that will make the message perpetually relevant to changing times. The exegete is to realize and reveal hidden meanings in the encompassing teaching with power to mirror every aspect of the human reality. In this sense *katha* is not a systematic analysis of texts but it provides a devotional means to dwell on perceived truths of the Gurus and look at life and the world through *gurbani*. Although the canon is sealed, the oral exegesis provides a living commentary to make the teaching of the scripture vivid.

People reckon *katha* as an excellent medium for religious edification and education. It plays an important role in creating ethical and moral attitudes and ethusing people towards righteous action. It is noteworthy that 46 percent of the informants who participated in the semi-structured interviews stated they have learnt about Sikh doctrines, the tradition and history from religious discourses in the gurdwara. The majority of respondents said family members (57 percent), and particularly parents and grandparents, were the most significant asset for religious learning, while a fewer number alleged they had pursued knowledge from books (23 percent) and school (11 percent). Even if the data is too scanty for any general conclusion, the figures seem to indicate that oral discourses continue to constitute a vital element for the transmission of tradition. Despite high rates of literacy and access to a growing bulk of written exegetical commentaries and narratives in books and on the Internet, many Sikhs still choose to learn and explore the meanings of the Sikh scripture through live oral performances.

### NARRATIVE STYLES AND TECHNIQUES

Dependent on the material and themes brought into focus, modern *katha* performances can be generalized into three broad categories that here will be termed *gurbani*-oriented, history-oriented, and comparative discourses. The first category usually goes by the name *gurbani katha* or *gurbani vichar* and more specifically refers to interpretations and reflections upon the Gurus' teaching. Standard expositions in this category dwell on literal and subtler meanings of a didactic portion of stanzas or hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib, such as the *mulmantra* or *Japji Sahib*, or explain general messages in the Sikh scripture, often with the aim to convey moral truths to foster faith and worship routines. As one local *kathakar* explained, *vichar* is intended to develop people's thinking, make them continually progress and reach results, and is different from argumentation in which people already have their "mind set" and are not willing to expand their horizons. Apart from quotes from the corpus of texts ascribed *gurbani* status, the orator may take use of cross-references to a body of suitable illustrations in the narrative tradition, Punjabi proverbs, short-stories, and aphorisms to create allegories, analogies and images, which serve to explain and support a

moral point or a religious idea in a refreshing manner.<sup>532</sup> Similar to what Bauman (1992) has observed in a study of Icelandic legends, the performance allows for interplay of several speech genres that are embedded with one and another and generate a dialogue of genres within the oral text. The juxtaposing of speech genres drawn from multiple sources and the dialogic relationship between them becomes the main resource for organization of contexts and production of meanings.<sup>533</sup>

History-oriented *katha* performances tend to focus more exclusively on the lives of the Sikh Gurus and significant events, places, and persons in the Sikh history. This type of discourse is normally staged in relation to major Sikh festivals to evoke themes important and appropriate for the occasion of celebration. The exposition is a significant medium for the transmission of a tradition that glorifies the Sikh Gurus, devout disciples, and martyrs in history and highlights the relevance of their deeds for Sikhs at the present. Although the history-oriented performances usually are structured on selected anecdotes or short stories from a variety of sources in the oral and textual narrative traditions, citations of lines from the Guru Granth Sahib are often interpolated to anchor spiritual and moral messages or the culminating punch line in *gurbani*.

The third category – comparative *katha* – has usually an unorthodox approach that aims to communicate universal messages of the Guru Granth Sahib by making parallels to similar ideas and moral standpoints in the teachings of other religions. Performances in this category commonly start out from general themes, such as “true love” or “purity of mind”, to work up a discourse on universal truths in the Sikh teaching from a comparative perspective. Within the structure of a *katha* the performer may alternate interpretations of *gurbani*, anecdotes on the Sikh Gurus, philosophical and moral reflections, added with shorter quotations from the Koran, Bible or some other scripture. The method requires that the performer is well-versed in an array of supporting non-Sikh texts.

Typical of all these expositions is the incessant oscillation back and forth in time to support and traditionalize interpretations with historical references and quotations from the Guru Granth Sahib and simultaneously bridge the temporal distance with commentaries to make the Gurus’ teaching and deeds relevant in the present. The unanimity among Sikh *kathakars* comes from the fact that all of them depend on *gurbani*, but their individual originality is the result of personal ability to interpret and build up commentaries which suit and display competence in the language and concerns of the audience. *Katha* performances are what Tedlock & Manheim (1995) have termed “double-voicing”, that is, the performer will adopt the linguistic mannerism of the audience, rather than quoting them directly, to communicate points in dis-

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<sup>532</sup> Popular historical sources for these illustrations are, for example, the *Vars* and *Kabit Sawayee* of Bhai Gurdas, the writings of Bhai Nand Lal, Dasam Granth ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh, *Suraj Prakash* and *Nanak Prakash* by Kavi Santokh Singh, and the *Gurbilas* literature about the sixth and the tenth Guru.

<sup>533</sup> Baumann 1992.

courses.<sup>534</sup> The mimicry of people's contemporary concerns is accomplished by using words, motifs, metaphors, and other rhetorical devices to target the language of the audience and support the reality within a shared cultural system. The performer may thus introduce doctrines and moral principles that are already known to the audience but his duty and success lies in the ability to expound the Sikh teaching in a new inspiring, edifying and noble way. To achieve this he will rely on a set of narrative techniques to oratory power, such as rhetorical questions (e.g. "Visiting all these pilgrimage sites what will you gain?"), tasteful provocations ("Visiting pilgrimage sites is waste of time"), moral and theological exhortations ("Believe in one God and not in buildings!"), humour and irony, citations of texts, change of pitch, intonations, and acceleration and deceleration of speech tempo.

In comparison with *katha* performances in other religious traditions in India,<sup>535</sup> the interaction between the performer and the audience during oral Sikh expositions in the gurdwara is low-keyed, in the sense that devotees, who constitute the audience, may enter and leave the performance as they like, but they listen to the discourse silently and do not interrupt a performer on stage with appreciative or disapproving comments or gestures. The only tangible sign of appraisal a *kathakar* may receive during the sermon is the customary offering of monetary gifts – generally a note of 10 rupees or more – that will be placed before him. While the program is going on the donor will rise from his or her positions in the gurdwara, walk up to the dais on which the expounder is seated and drop the note. Still the success of the performer lies in his ability to establish constant contact with the immediate environment and he will draw upon a number of devices, such as his vocal capacity, eye contact, and modest gestures, to attract the attention of the audience. Since listeners are not obligated to sit during a staged *katha* performance he can easily judge from their behaviour whether the performance is effective or not. The state secretary of the gurdwara committee in Varanasi has the right to interrupt a performance in case the purport of a discourse is considered improper or not in compliance with Sikh teaching.<sup>536</sup> Evaluations of the other devotees, however, are reserved for post-performance

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<sup>534</sup> Tedlock & Manheim 1995: 16. In Varanasi the adoption of linguistic mannerism is also palpable in the choice of spoken language. Instead of presenting their performances in Punjabi local *kathakars* will emphasize the importance of speaking in Hindi.

<sup>535</sup> Lutgendorf 1991: 127.

<sup>536</sup> The only case of disapproval that came to my knowledge involved a young *kathakar* who was deemed too vulgar and provocative in his speech. In one discourse, in which he criticized ritualism in Varanasi, he told a story about a woman who covered the excrement of her child with soil to prevent people from stepping in it. Two women came to assist her with the sprinkling of soil and soon more people would come and imitate the action of the women, believing it was religious worship. By the evening there was big pile of soil. The *kathakar* rhetorically questioned, "If you dig into the pile what will you find?" The instance of this *kathakar* exemplifies the key rule to balance jokes, critical remarks, and exhortations in good taste without jeopardizing the major aim of the discourse.



discussions in the congregation and will influence future invitations of an individual performer.

The structure of *katha* performances may be exposed to substantial variations, considering that *kathakars* are not manuscript preachers who read prepared notes but give oratory from memory and deliver individual interpretations adjusted to a particular situation and interaction with an audience. Some will downplay preparations before performances and instead allege that their ability to manifest eloquences and cohesive discourses on stage are spontaneous acts out of devotion graced by God. When the renowned *kathakar* Giani Sant Singh Maskin commented on this matter on his visit to Varanasi he said “the things you put in a pot will come out of the pot,” and explained that karma from previous lives in combination with extensive studies and regular meditation on God are life-long preparations for those who will teach religion.<sup>537</sup> Although the content of *katha* performances allow for variations and is the means by which the individual expounder may display knowledge and oratory skill, the formal structure of performances is likely to follow a fairly standardized pattern. Seated beside the throne of Guru Granth Sahib the *kathakar* starts the performance by a melodious utterance of the *mulmantra* and then recites the *dandaut*, or his personally chosen line or verse from the Guru Granth Sahib which will work as an invocation to God and settle his mind on *gurbani*. After that he will exclaim the Khalsa ovation to greet the congregation in line with the stipulated practice. Just like the prelude he will close the program by repeating Khalsa salutation in chorus with the audience. Altogether these speech acts set the external frame for an oral exposition.

The way an individual performer will start the actual *katha* depends on which type of discourse he is about to deliver and the narrative methods he prefers to use. Considering that performers are usually given a limited amount of time for their presentation – between fifteen to sixty minutes – the discourse will not be a systematic analysis of the teaching in Guru Granth Sahib but an elaborate improvisation on smaller sections.<sup>538</sup> The *kathakar* may choose to structure the discourse on a chosen single verse, a key word in a line, or bring up a central theme or topic for comment and philosophical expansions. Sometimes the congregation may ask the performer to speak on a particular subject. A common method among the *kathakars* I met and interviewed was to build the whole *katha* around the daily *Hukam* in the public gurdwara. An elderly *kathakar* working in Varanasi district said: “Before going to a *katha* I look at the blackboard in the gurdwara, which hymn is the *Hukam* of the day. Then I think about that hymn and do *katha* on it. I try to prove that what the hymn is saying is true.” The performer will first paraphrase the verse in a melodious and rhythmic manner and then explicate doctrinal and spiritual meanings of a significant word or theme in the hymn, sometimes by comparing the word or theme to its uses in other

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<sup>537</sup> In this context Giani Sant Singh Maskin also said he used to meditate between 5 and 7.30 every morning.

<sup>538</sup> Giani Sant Singh Maskin had developed a practice of expounding one subject for a period of a week or fifteen days in order to fully develop his interpretations of *gurbani*.

passages of the scripture. A middle-aged *kathakar*, for instance, exemplified his topical approach of straightforwardly discussing a theme, in this case on human desire (*trisna*), evoked by a stanza of the *Hukam* taken in Gurubagh Gurdwara on October 1, 2000:

[Introduction] The today's *Hukam* is *Dhanasri Mahala 1*, on page 661 in Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji:

[Quotation:] "My soul burns over and over again. Greatly agonised, the soul is distracted and falls prey to many sins. The body, which forgets the Guru's Word, screams like a chronic patient."

[Explanation:] The human mind/heart is always burning with the fire of desire [*trisna*]. The mind/heart thinks that if I have earned a thousand rupees today I can make it a hundred times more and get a hundred thousand rupees. If the mind/heart will get this it will again think that it can make ten hundred thousand rupees. There is no end to desires. But the one who runs after his desire in this way his desires will only increase. When we feed the fire with wood the fire will be much stronger. The fire will never say "Don't feed me with wood". The fire of desires is just like that. When desires are fulfilled in humans, the desires redouble. For that reason humans keep wandering [in births and deaths]. The life of a human will pass away in wandering. He forgets the main goal for entering the world. And the things he pursues here will be left here and not go with him. The only thing that will go with you is the things you have done. Both good karma and bad karma will go with you. It is not the matter that only good karma will go, bad karma will also go. The rest of things, such as properties, all will stay here. But even when a human knows that everything will be left here, not even his own body will go with him, still the fire of desires are furiously burning within him. He will get nothing but wandering. He will only be sad.

To support his interpretations the performer may wrap an excerpt of the Guru Granth Sahib in a rich embroidery of images and memorized anecdotes on the lives of the Sikh Gurus in an additive style or structure the whole *katha* on the inexhaustible meaning of a single story. On one occasion, another local *kathakar* wove the major part of a discourse around a detailed story on Guru Gobind Singh's meeting with a boatman to make the analogy to the Guru who carries people across the ocean of existence (*bhavsagar*), that is, liberates them from the cycle of birth and death. To support the final punch line of his discourse he quoted a *gurbani* verse which covered a similar theme. The same *kathakar* had a special fondness for rhyming word couples, such as *nemi-premi* – the follower of the code of conducts and the lover of the Guru –

and *sangat-pangat* – the holy congregation and the practice of sitting in lines sharing a meal – which he often made the subject of explications.

#### “THE SACRIFICES OF GURU GOBIND SINGH”

History-oriented discourses are more narrative-based and focus on the deeds of the Sikh Gurus. Performers will assert that the aim of these performances is to display the bravery of the Gurus and evoke the flavour or “taste” of heroism (*vir-ras*) embedded in Sikh history. To generate this flavour and substantiate interpretations of history the performer may weave an intertextual web with quotations and discourses from a variety of sources, and especially from the Guru Granth Sahib. To conclude this section I will render an historical *katha* on the theme “The Sacrifices of Guru Gobind Singh”, which dealt with the consequences of Guru Tegh Bahadur’s martyrdom in 1675. The discourse was delivered by Jaswant Singh, an elderly *kathakar* operating mainly in Varanasi district, during the celebration of Guru Gobind Singh’s birthday in January 2001. The transcription of the approximately fifteen minutes long oral exposition certainly does not do justice to the evocative and electric atmosphere created in the performance situation, but it may be illustrative of how an exegete builds up a story, creates dialogues within the discourse, uses rhetorical questions to direct the audience, and ends with a coda that emphasizes the immediacy of historical events for the audience. In this example the exegete quoted one *gurbani* verse to verify the historical setting of Moghul rulers. He also made a reference to the Koran to confirm that the advent of Guru Gobind Singh, as a prophet (*nabi paigambar*) sent by God, was already predicted in sacred scriptures of other religions. In the ending coda the *kathakar* tried to bridge the temporal distance between the sacrifices of the Guru and the present by asserting the Guru’s sacrifices as conditional for religious freedom and independence in the Indian democracy. Guru Gobind Singh’s entrance into the world and his sacrifices were thus not merely events in a remote past that should be commemorated on a festival day in the calendar, but celebrated for the implications these events have on people’s lives today. The metamessage communicated beyond the parameters of the performance revealed that the Guru sacrificed his own father to procure religious freedom for all.

[Salutation] *Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji Fateh!*

[Narrative] When we study the life of Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj then we will see truth in the world. When you see his life then you will know that Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj is an incarnation and prophet in this world. He is the leader who revealed the path of life to people who were lost. What was the situation? The situation in our country of *sanatan dharma* was this: Bharat [India] was riding on the boat in a storm and the boat was sinking. Remember the Mughal rulers, they ordered that nothing should be seen in India except for Islam. During the time of Aurangzeb he wanted to see nothing else but Islam for as

far as his sight would reach. He ordered the decree. What was the result? A cloud of terror took charge over the leading Brahmins. Killings and torture took place everywhere. People lost their honour. They looked for support but they could not find it. They say there is proof in the Guru Granth Sahib ji that:

[Quotation] "In each and every age, he created his devotees and preserves their honour."

[Interpretation] When the Lord created this world, in that time he created both evil persons and saints. That was the rule of country and religion.

[Narrative] They [the Brahmins] asked for support everywhere but they did not find any. Leading Hindus, who called themselves protectors of dharma, came to Anandpur Sahib for shelter. At the place of whom? They took shelter at the place of Guru Tegh Bahadur Maharaj. And they said:

- "Save our religion." Because they have heard voices that God will send his prophet in every age. Did you not look in your scripture? It is written in the *Koran Sharif* that when people have gone astray God will send his prophet for the leadership of lost people. Realizing the situation of that time, Guru Tegh Bahadur Maharaj listened to the request [of the Brahmins]. But this was the time of examination. Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib said:

- "There are many who call themselves protectors of dharma. Any great man, stand up and give your sacrifice to save dharma. This sacrifice is nothing for those who are courageous."

Guru Tegh Bahadur has taken a test but no son of the Hindus came forward. Then who came? The son of God. Guru Gobind Singh ji came in his childhood, in the age of nine. Guru Tegh Bahadur told him that the Brahmins, they are the leaders of Hindus:

- "King Aurangzeb has ordered that nothing but Islam would be seen in India. These poor people came and they are crying and requesting us to protect their religion. They have taken shelter. Son, if any great man will stand up and give his sacrifice then dharma will be saved."

Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj at the age of nine smiled and said:

- "Father, if they did not consider you a great man, then why have they come to you for shelter? Save them from the trouble which this religion has encountered."

Guru Tegh Bahadur ji Maharaj said:

- "This will happen. I have decided who will do a sacrifice for this religion. Today I will go and you shall occupy this seat [*gaddi*]. The responsibility will come on your shoulders."

Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj smiled and said:

- "Father, do not worry about me."

[Coda] Children of today! Look into history and you will find that the father is great and the son is great who sends his father for sacrifice. That father is great who obeys his son and goes to be sacrificed. History is evidence. Because of that Bhai Santok Singh has written that if a gentle man and gentle fakir like Guru Gobind Singh ji would not have come into this world, the map of India would be different. This is a fact. That our India is happy and independent is the result of his grace and sacrifices. Whether you follow a religion or hang a colourful flag on your door there are no restrictions on us. This freedom is the grace of Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj. The religious gathering we see and the religious discourses taking place are only possible because of Guru Gobind Singh ji Maharaj. We are celebrating his respected birthday. Now it is time to finish. I am calling "Victory" [*fateh*] here! Give the reply of "Victory"!

[Salutation] *Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki Fateh!*

### 3.4. SIMRAN – REMEMBERING THE DIVINE NAME

Every Sunday between 4 and 5.30 in the morning a group of about thirty people, Sikhs and Sindhis, assembles at the house of a selected family for a joint program of *nam simran*, or inner meditation by chanting the name of God. Refraining from unnecessary talk, they remove their shoes and sandals before entering the host's living room. Their heads are covered with turbans and shawls. When all those gathered have settled in rows on the floor, men and women on separate sides, the doors are closed, curtains drawn, and all lights put out. In darkness the host will put on a cassette tape titled "*Simran practice*" (*Simran sadhna* [Punjabi] or *Simran abhyas* [Sanskrit]) – a recorded version of a devotional (often live) performance by a well-known and pious Sikh musician or reciter who will combine the singing of *gurbani* hymns with repetitions of the divine name. The sound of the male voice is turned up to the highest volume, hovering and reverberating in the confined space. Keeping their eyes shut, people listen and soon start to join in, imitating the recorded performance. After some thirty minutes the music fades into a unison chanting the name of God – *Vahiguru* – led by the taped performer. Gradually the sound of instruments disappears and the pace of the repetition intensifies. All participants regulate their breathing to the pronunciation – inhaling with the utterance of "*vahi*" and aspirating "*guru*" – at a faster speed until every respiring second in the room is imbued with loud polyphonic

sounds of female and male voices. Depending upon which tape is selected the intensive repetition under control of the breath may continue for several minutes, to be repeated at intervals, and eventually relapse into a slower melodious singing. At the very end of the *simran* event, one and a half hours later, the lights are switched on and everyone rises to a standing position for a joint reading of *Ardas* before they continue home to their daily duties at daybreak.

The concept of *simran* refers to a devotional practice of interiorizing the godly name through remembrance (*nam simran*) and repetition (*nam japna*). In Sikh teaching the divine name (*Nam*) is an aspect of the Supreme Being and a principal feature of the doctrine of salvation. By chanting and continually contemplating on the name of God devotees will attach with the divine from within and acquire divine qualities that will lead to spiritual progress and eventually liberation. In contemporary worship the notion of *simran* refers to a wide range of worship forms and methods with various degrees of formalization which can be practiced in individual and corporate ways: the devotee may take up a discipline to repeat and meditate on the divine name in solitude or participate in the holy congregation to seek and experience mystical unity with God through singing and hearing praises. The practice is non-discursive in the sense that it does not necessarily aim to explore semantic and theological dimensions of the word but is a means to obtain powers ascribed to the word and lay down a bridge between the individual devotee and the divine. Similar to what Tambiah (1968) purports, words are co-substantiated with things they denote and to name a thing is to make it manifest.<sup>539</sup> To verbally repeat and contemplate upon the name of God is a devotional device to praise and invoke a divine power which has capacities to transform the inner of humans and alter outer action to virtuous deeds. In the widest meaning the term *simran* may in fact comprise most devotional practices in Sikh worship, and in a narrower definition it signifies particular techniques which incorporate verbal repetition and remembrance of God's name. Before describing the concept and practice of *simran* within a local community, we must first consider how Sikhs may conceptualize the primary object of these actions, that is, the divine name.

#### THE NAME OF GOD – VAHIGURU

"In *nam simran* you recite only *Vahiguru*," a younger man in the gurdwara instructed me, and continued, "If you do that for one and a half hours in the morning, it will give you peace for the whole day." Of all epithets and attributive names given to God in the Guru Granth Sahib, it is primarily *Vahiguru*, literally "Wonderful Guru", which is the object of *nam simran* practices and considered the medium of spiritual quests for union with God.<sup>540</sup> According to a popular understanding, based on an scribal pun of

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<sup>539</sup> Tambiah 1968.

<sup>540</sup> Other names for God have also been used in the Sikh tradition. Several *janam-sakhis* on Guru Nanak, for instance, prescribe repetition of the name of Ram (McLeod 1980a: 100).

Bhai Gurdas (1551-1636), the term *Vahiguru* is composed of four holy syllables - Vava, Haha, Gaga and Rara - which in Hindu mythology separately represent four divine names in four ages (*yug*) of the creation (*sat*, *dvapar*, *treta* and *kali*). At the turn of the sixteenth century Bhai Gurdas wrote:

In *satyug*, Visnu in the form of Vasudev is said to have incarnated and the 'V' of *Vahiguru* reminds of Visnu.  
 The true Guru of *dvapar* is said to be Harikrsna and 'H' of *Vahiguru* reminds of Hari.  
 In the *treta* was Ram and 'R' of *Vahiguru* tells that remembering Ram will produce joy and happiness.  
 In *kaliyug*, Gobind is in the form of Nanak and 'G' of *Vahiguru* gets Gobind recited.  
 The recitations of all the four ages subsume in Panchayan i.e., in the soul of the common man.  
 When joining four letters *Vahiguru* is remembered, the *jiv* merges again in its origin.<sup>541</sup>

Local Sikhs frequently evoke this textual reference in verbal expositions on the phrase *Vahiguru*, but interpret it in quite different ways depending upon individual theological conceptions. Some would argue that the compound signifies various incarnations of God through the time axis of a creation, including the Sikh Gurus who took human birth in the Dark Age (*kaliyug*). This inclusive interpretation often interlinks mythologies of popular Hinduism to demonstrate how the divine power has been manifested in the divinity of Vishnu, Ram and Hari and finally Guru Nanak. The term *Vahiguru* stands as a diachronically accumulated representation of a whole range of deities in the Hindu cosmology and the apotheosized Sikh Gurus,<sup>542</sup> who all share their origin from the same divine source. To utter the word of *Vahiguru* is thus to remember and invoke deities in all ages.

A more common and exclusive Sikh position stresses the transcendent and impersonal aspects of God to argue that *Vahiguru* is the amalgam of different labels of a singular almighty power that governs the whole creation, and not to be associated with incarnated deities of the Hindu tradition. According to this interpretation, to join four separate syllables into the compound of *Vahiguru* is a denominative rather than theological matter: it represents different designations of the one God which become powerful when united. Using a body metaphor a younger Sikh man compared the

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<sup>541</sup> Jodh Singh 1998: 79.

<sup>542</sup> An elderly female interlocutor informed that one of her family members used to do *simran* of the name of Guru Tegh Bahadur instead of *Vahiguru*: "Every time she says Guru Tegh Bahadur, my Guru he has done everything, he is the almighty." It seems to be quite widely practiced that individuals select one of the ten human Gurus who they admire and are specially devoted to, and whose name they invoke for protection and support in various situations (for instance by saying "Dhan Dhan Guru Tegh Bahadur ji" or "blessed is respected Guru Tegh Bahadur").

perception of *Vahiguru* with that of the human hand: one can perceive the hand by distinguishing and naming the thumb, forefinger, and so on, but “like five separate fingers becomes very strong when clenched to a fist, similarly *Vahiguru* is the collection of all power.” Although the whole creation is believed to be a divine manifestation, the formless God does not incarnate but is known by its name. It is within this cosmological framework the majority of my interlocutors explained *Vahiguru* as a name of the almighty and formless God, or “the eternal power (*akal shakti*) which you cannot touch nor see, but you can feel,” as one man put it. That the sacred formula of *Vahiguru* designates a singular divine power is further emphasized by the way Sikhs let the word *Satnam*, or “the true name”, precede the compound in recitations and calligraphic inscriptions. Consistent with this view, the term *Vahiguru* does not comprise references to the Sikh Gurus since they were messengers and spiritual preceptors who bestowed the world knowledge and the name of God. From this understanding *Vahiguru* is commonly said to be the *gurmantra*, that is, the sacred formula charged with power, which is given to the disciples of Sikhs for remembrance of the divine. Several interlocutors alleged that any godly name, even Allah and Jehovah, could be used to recall and meditate on God, but *Vahiguru* was the sacred name sanctioned by their Gurus. For *Amritdhari* Sikhs it is said to be the *gurmantra* that was given to Sikhs at the time of the *Khande di pahul* ceremony and which all initiated Khalsa Sikhs should continually remember and recite.

#### INNER AND OUTER ACTION

The ways in which local Sikhs have come to use the *gurmantra* in their religious and social life are countless. The abstract teaching of the divine name is “thingified” in inscriptions of the *gurmantra* that are printed on posters, stickers and other materials to be used as amulets pasted on rear windows, entrances to the house, and other places to protect the holder from misfortune.<sup>543</sup> In the everyday life, people may internally repeat the name of *Vahiguru* when they are riding a cycle or scooter, walking, sitting, travelling on a bus, or going to bed. A middle-aged *Amritdhari* woman used to put on a tape with *simran* practices in the morning and sang along while completing her domestic duties. In moments of emotional distress or physical discomfort many Sikhs will recite the name of God in a voiced or soundless manner to gain inner strength and courage. This is particularly noticeable in speech acts that seek divine assistance to shield human or supernatural ill wishers. An elderly Sikh man, for instance, used to repeat the *gurmantra* to ward off all possible dangers caused by humans and spirits when he sometimes had to walk alone through the city in the middle of the night. Upon facing evildoers in the reality or in dreams the utterance of *Satnam Vahiguru* is believed to invoke the power behind the name for protection. As an elderly *Amritdhari* woman argued, those who are not performing *simran* are more

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<sup>543</sup> Along with the signs of *Ik omkar*, the first inscription in Guru Granth Sahib, and the *Degh-Tegh-Fateh* or *Khanda* sign.



liable to spirit possession and other types of afflictions since the space of their inner gurdwara is empty, “but if you recite *Vahiguru*, even the shivering from a cold bath in the winter season will disappear.” According to a general opinion the Sikh Gurus instituted the recitative repetition of the divine name (*nam japna*) as a devotional practice for all Sikhs, but for illiterates in particular. If they repeat the name of *Vahiguru* 108 times with devotion, it will grant the same value and substitute readings from the Sikh scripture. For literates, recitations of the *gurbantra* for one hour may work as a temporary replacement for the daily *nitnem*, or a “relaxation” as some termed it, when a person is physically ill or for some other reason is unable to carry out the daily *gurbani* recitations. Another less common but still existent type of *simran* for literates is the practice to quantitatively collect and recollect the divine name by spelling *Vahiguru* in Gurmukhi script a number of times in a notepad. When the book is filled with inscribed names of God it will be ceremonially immersed in the river Ganga.<sup>544</sup> The various practices included in the concept of *simran* are regarded as worship forms by which people may gain spiritual merits.

The majority of my interlocutors ascribed *simran* the dual definition of being an interior activity of recalling and keeping the divine name in one’s mind (*simran*), and an outer action of articulating the name in sound (*japna*). In both cases the sacred formula of *Vahiguru* is the vehicle and object of repeated action performed mentally and through speech. The internal remembrance can be momentary evocations during spare time or in any situation of experienced need, but as a regular devotional practice (*sadhna*) of *simran* it should be anchored in two conditions within humans: concentration of the mind and devotion to the divine from a true heart. Outer sensuous impression is to be intentionally avoided in order to focus the mind on internal read-

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<sup>544</sup> An elderly businesswoman said: “When I am sitting in my shop and I am free, I just write *Vahiguru* on three to four pages. When there is nothing to do, then I keep only *Vahiguru* in my mind. I write in Gurmukhi.” This discipline is based on an idea similar to the institutionalized “Ram-bank” in Varanasi – a Ram temple which was formed in the beginning of the twentieth century after the banking world. Following the popular idea that the effects of a mantra (*siddhi*) come to practitioners with 125000 completed names, literate devotees suffering from afflictions or with specific desires can take “writing-loans” of 125000 names of Ram from this “bank”. The client pays by daily instalments of writing 500 names of Ram on papers for a total period of seven months and ten days. These papers will then be collected by the bank and followed by a *puja* for the borrower and his or her wishes or desired ends (Myrvold 2002a). As Lutgendorf notes, the exercise of writing out divine formula is not new. At the Sankat Mochan Mandir in Varanasi, for instance, devotees present Hanuman with paper garlands adorned with inscriptions of “Ram” (Lutgendorf 1991: 413). Maybe the *Ramnamis* – an untouchable community in Central India devoted to Ram – has taken this custom to the most far-reaching extent. The *Ramnamis* inscribe the name of Ram in Devanagari script over their faces and bodies, sometime covering the entire skin, and wear distinctive dresses that are printed with the sacred name. In an ethnographic study of the *Ramnamis*, Lamb highlights that bodily inscriptions stand as testimonies for a lifelong commitment to Ram and the community of worship. In fact, the tattoos are often described as Ram’s inscription on human bodies. In other words, it is an act of the deity, who manifests his sacred and purifying name on human flesh (Lamb 2002: 84).

ings and reflections on the divine name. In this understanding *simran* is often termed as a form of meditation to be carried out in a quiet environment in solitude or in the company of pious people.<sup>545</sup> Since the formless God cannot be cognitively perceived in visual imaginations, like natural and manmade things in the human environment, the object of meditation is solely the name of God. A nineteen-year-old man and a regular *simran* practitioner himself probably explicated the idea of contemplative remembrance in the most reflective terms:

This word *Vahiguru* is made by the Gurus. The word does not have any meaning. If I will say the word dog you will immediately get the image of a dog. The word dog does not mean anything, but by its name you can create an image of a dog in your mind. *Vahiguru* is the name of God. This is a name and our reverence is with that word. By saying *Vahiguru* we meditate on God. You cannot remember an image of the shapeless God, so you meditate on the name... You feel and try to see the universe within yourself. This is the human body... and there are different bodies, like those of animals, but everyone has the same light (*jot*). That light is the soul given by God. If that light is one of *nam simran* it will disappear in God. But even Guru ji said, "I just want to meditate at Your [God's] feet. I do not even wish for salvation."

This and similar explanations given by other interlocutors presuppose a tripartite conception of the human composite, made up by a physical body (*tan*), an inner god-like soul (*atma*) and a mind/heart (*man*). The latter – the mind/heart – is a powerful mental and emotional faculty that attempts to divert humans from their divine inner self and make their actions driven by passions and attachments in the outer world. All people are continuously dwelling on things which usually distract their minds. Unlike cognitive prototypes (a "dog") of typical instances which humans create from the world and against which they match things in the world, the formless God is beyond these mental representations and can only be appealed by its name. The continuous recollection of the *gurmantra* becomes a devotional device to regulate and cultivate the mind/heart and create connectedness with the infinite self. To speak and think of the godly name is to invoke the divine power immanent in the human soul which will leave imprints and even transform the inner mind/heart. People who are graced with devotion (*bhakti*) and the quality of being fully attentive and concentrated (*dhyān*) will be absorbed in ceaseless contemplation and ultimately experience identification and unity with God. *Simran* is both the means and end in itself, in that it is a practice that aims to attach with the formless God within oneself at the same time as the practice achieves human-divine connectedness, which is the ultimate goal of all

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<sup>545</sup> The Sikh *nam simran* is however not regulated by strict body postures or breathing techniques like the yoga and meditation practices of other Indian religions, but resembles the various methods of silent or voiced recollections of *Allah* and the Muslim *bismillah* in Sufi *zikr*.

devotional activities. The young man said that *simran* should not be a goal-oriented practice in the sense that it is performed to procure spiritual or material ends in this life: "It does not have any end; it is just to concentrate on God." Other interlocutors would present *simran* as the primary contemplative method of gaining merits for the future and set the practice within a more mythological framework: God watches over people who take out time to remember the divine name and all names will be calculated in a divine court. When the human soul reaches the court after death the celestial book-keeper *Chitra Gupt* balances the accounts of an individual life and the total accumulation of remembered names will determine the next rebirth.

Unlike popular Western perceptions of "meditation" as a silent and introspect practice, the idea of *simran* in a local Sikh setting involves continuous repetition and listening to the *gurbantra*, as effective means to focus on the object of invocation. The interior remembrance and contemplation is accomplished by different formalized practices of repeating the divine name (*nam japna*), either in a soundless manner or with words in audible speech. Preferably Sikhs should adopt a regular discipline of reciting *Vahiguru* in the early morning hours of *amritvela* when the mind is fresh and the surroundings peaceful. The technique can be carried out as a simple recitation or by using a rosary with 27 or 108 beads, each of which is rolled off with the forefinger and thumb to the utterance of the *gurbantra*. The reciter should select a quiet place to establish a temporary seat and assume a sitting posture (*samadhi*) for the contemplative recital. There are no prescribed or fixed numbers to recite the *gurbantra*.<sup>546</sup> Instead, the guiding rule seems to be as much as possible according to individual ability. The repetition can be uttered loudly or soundless in unison with the heartbeats or breathing. A mere mechanical repetition of *Vahiguru* from one's lips, however, is not considered sufficient. One elderly man said: "You have to remember God by your heart, only then God will listen... You may recite the whole day, but nothing will happen if you do not remember God from within." The practice of *nam japna* will only prove favourable when propelled with sincere devotion and the mind is immersed in contemplation on the divine name.

The practice of *simran* is believed to induce people to do righteous deeds and should ideally underlie all action and deeds in the Sikh life. Over and again, my informants coupled *simran* with the term *seva*, the selfless service to the Guru, co-devotees and humans in general, and described these two concepts as two interdependent aspects – an inner and an outer – of the Sikh devotional life. A Sikh man in his fifties expressed himself in the following way:

*Seva* and *simran*, they are two parts of life. *Simran* is remembering God and *seva* is done by your hands. If you want to cross the *bhavsagar* of this world *seva* and *simran* is like the boat and boatman. If you want to cross you need a boat and boatman who can row you over. If you just have one of them you cannot cross the sea.

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<sup>546</sup> Except for when 108 *Vahiguru* recitations are executed in lieu of *gurbani* readings.

Although the terms *seva* and *simran* are conceptually separate, they are two pillars of the Sikh teaching that should be complimentary and assist one another in practice. Conducting *simran* only for one's own spiritual progress could lead to a self-centeredness which service to others is capable of eliminating. Selfless acts to others performed in continuous remembrance of God will, on the other hand, be more beneficial to a doer. The combination of *simran* and *seva* is a central feature of many Sikh ceremonies, such as the public distribution of food from the communal kitchen (*langar*) in the gurdwara. While devotees are distributing the food which has been sanctified by the Guru all should ideally recite the formula "Satnam Vahiguru" to remember and invoke the name of God while sharing a meal. The practice of *simran* is believed to charge outer action with spiritual properties and transform all action into virtuous deeds. On one occasion in the gurdwara the *granthi* was educating a junior *ragi jatha* to always let a short *simran* session precede performances. This would help them settle their minds on God and change their ordinary singing-voices into captivating media of *gurbani*, the *granthi* alleged. Outwardly actions that spring forth from a mind imprinted with the divine name will be righteous and godlike. Spiritually gifted people are believed to incessantly dwell on God. Alluding to a hymn of Kabir, the *granthi* said the name of God abides in the heart of saintly persons who will repeat *Vahiguru* subconsciously, even in their dreams. "In our religion we have to keep our minds on God for twenty-four hours. Whichever work you have to do, act and do *simran*... You should not breathe without remembering God," he said. Although these instructions certainly are ideals to strive towards, many of my interlocutors admitted that disciplinary recollections and recitations of the divine name are hard to attain in the everyday life for varying reasons. While conversing on this subject a middle-aged housewife stigmatized herself as a "sinner" because she used to keep later hours and simply could not wake up for *simran* program in the early nectar-hours. A younger man, who indeed rose before dawn to devote himself to meditation, admitted that his concentration was frequently tottering. Whenever this happened he just broke off the *simran* session and performed a supplication in which he pleaded to God for more strength the following day. As he argued, the attentiveness and power of mind required for regular *simran* practices are ultimately a divine gift graced by God.

#### COLLECTIVE NAM SIMRAN PROGRAMS

Although *simran* is primarily an individual activity, companionship with co-devotees is considered to provide a favourable religious setting for the spiritual quest of individuals. During music performances in the gurdwaras, Sikh *ragis* frequently insert a shorter *simran* session, accompanied with harmonium and tabla, as a prelude or ending of the ordinary program. This is usually a melodious chanting performed antiphonally: the main *ragi* will sing "*Vahiguru*" and the audience responds by repeating

the name. The musician may lead the tuneful chanting for several minutes in order to create a religious atmosphere and engage the congregation in meditation.

A far more formalized activity is the *nam simran* program organized in the gurdwara or at a private house by a group of devotees who have undertaken the discipline to sing and repeat the *gurmantra* jointly for one and a half hours each Sunday morning at 4:00.<sup>547</sup> As briefed in the introduction to this section, participants intentionally cut themselves off from the social reality to create a separate space in which precedence is given to the auditory sense. Seated in a dark room they will start singing *gurbani* hymns to music, and then pass into a more intensive unison chanting of the *gurmantra* under control of the breath. The distinct breathing technique follows a fairly standardized pattern: while inhaling the person will utter the first syllable – *Vahi* – and omit the last vowel, followed by an exhalation of the two following syllables – *gu ru* – with long intonation on the ending vowel if *nam simran* is performed at a slow speed. During a practical demonstration of the method, a younger man said that “*Vahi*” should emanate from the inside, as if being pulled out from the belly button, whereas the sound of “*guru*” flows from the mouth. When repeating at a hurried pace the first syllable is replaced by the sound of an exaggerated inhalation and a sharper pronunciation of the consonants – “*gru*” – when breathing out. Among a few *Amritdhari* Sikhs in Varanasi this *simran* technique is occasionally exercised in ordinary greetings and frame conversations. When two friends meet they will embrace each other, and adjust their breathing to one another’s, to repeat the name of *Vahiguru* in unison for a couple of minutes. They will start everyday talk only after they have jointly exclaimed the Khalsa ovation. During *nam simran* programs the chanting rhythm alternates: it starts with the singing of devotional songs and repetitions of the *gurmantra* at a slow tempo, and after some minutes gradually increases to a faster rhythm. The continuous oscillation between slow and fast repetitions should not move participants into trance-like states but make them enter into an experience of the divine while retaining consciousness and concentration. The control of space and oscillation of rhythms are seen as modes to prevent participants from sinking into drowsiness or engaging in the surrounding environment.

The *nam simran* gathering constitutes an interesting blend of traditional oral performance and the modern technology of audio-recordings. Each Sunday program in Varanasi is structured on a 90-minutes long recording of a *simran sadhna*, or “*simran practice*” on cassette, which the local Sikhs play back and sing along. The *simran* cassettes in use are recordings of live performances, fully embedded in a traditional context of a *sadh sangat*, an assembly of true devotees who have gathered for singing and chanting the divine name under direction of one or a group of pious Sikhs. The date and place of the recorded event is often specified on the tape cover, along with a picture of the saintly leader(s).

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<sup>547</sup> During my fieldwork the *nam simran* program continued throughout the year, except for the periods of morning processions preceding the birth anniversaries of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh.

The reason why local Sikhs prefer to use recorded audiocassettes in collective *nam simran* programs can, on a general level, be found in the extensively popular usage of recorded sound.<sup>548</sup> The broader Sikh community has been receptive to modern technology. Cassettes and compact discs on devotional music (*kirtan*), exegetical discourses (*katha*), and recitations of *gurbani* hymns are today mass-produced for a growing market in India and abroad, although the impact of modern media on Sikh worship and contextual variations are still to be examined.<sup>549</sup> In Varanasi, recorded music and recitations by Sikh performers of regional and national fame are widely used in homes for devotional or educational purposes.<sup>550</sup> Hindi-speaking Sikhs will utilize audiocassettes when memorizing and training pronunciation of *gurbani* hymns. These recordings have in no way replaced live performances in the gurdwaras, but serve more as supplementary media. The *nam simran* program is the only public event dependent on recorded sound, and this exception seems to be rooted in beliefs related to appropriate spiritual guidance. Only individuals who are deemed saintly and fully engaged in *simran* can lead common people in the disciplined practices. Since no person in Varanasi lives up to these standards, recorded tapes provide a means to receive instructions of saintly persons at other geographical locations. Although the traditional performer – audience (or teacher – student) interaction is absent, the playback of a tape allows overcoming limitations of physical distance between a local congregation and a renowned saintly guide. That *nam simran* tapes are recordings of live performances, rather than studio productions, emphasizes the participatory aspect. Devotees gather at a place and form a group that joins in the recorded performances as if they were participating in a congregation in the presence of a devout instructor. These tapes framed and supplied the content of all Sunday events I took part in.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> A growing bulk of scholarly studies on modern media in India has paid attention to how the production of audiocassettes has promoted standardizations of devotional performances, as compared to oral live performances. At the same time it has contributed to a democratization of religious practice, since cassettes can be consumed at a cheap rate and are convenient to lay people (see Manuel 1993, Babb & Wadley 1997).

<sup>549</sup> Mansukhani 1982 and Manuel 1993 mention the existence of modern Sikh media.

<sup>550</sup> These recordings were either purchased on pilgrimage tours or family trips to Punjab and Delhi, or procured by the local Sikh reseller of religious media, who always set up a small fair booth with *gutkas*, bracelets (*karah*), ornaments, tapes and compact discs outside the gurdwara on festival days.

<sup>551</sup> The only exception occurred in March 2001 when a highly esteemed *ragi* from Ludhiana visited Varanasi for a music program. At the request of the local congregation the performer agreed to lead the regular *nam simran* program between 4.00 and 5.30 in the morning at Gurubagh Gurdwara. To document the event I decided to video record the full program carried out in semi-darkness. Afterwards some of the participants asked if they could copy the recording, which I agreed to. To the inquiry about which purpose the tapes would be used I was told it was for guidance of private *simran* practices. Since a regular physical interaction with the performer was rendered impossible due to geographical distances families in Varanasi would do *nam*



*Simran sadhna* on cassette

In addition to the *nam simran* programs, verbal repetitions with breathing control can certainly be exercised without any instructor. An even more disciplinary *simran* method is the so-called *akhand jap*, or “unbroken repetition” of the name of *Vahiguru* for all from 4 to 24 hours uninterruptedly. These events are typically organized on special occasions, such as in connection with anniversary days commemorating the Sikh Gurus or the Christian New Year.<sup>552</sup> The unbroken *simran* can be commenced after the obligatory reading of *Rahiras Sahib* at dusk and continue for the whole night until the break of ambrosial hours (*amritvela*), or be scheduled as a one day-program between the rising and setting of the sun. Participants will then take turns in keeping the *simran* unbroken and sometimes divide the chanting assembly so that women are doing *akhand jap* in the day time and men throughout the night. All of these events are referred to as *sadhna*, or a spiritual practice or exercise which individuals do in company with likeminded people.

In the evening of December 31 in 2000, a smaller group of young and old Sikh men got together in Nichibagh Gurdwara to do *shabad kirtan* and *simran* for the beginning of a new year. In the subdued light all participants were seated on the floor outside *tapasthan* – the place at which Guru Tegh Bahadur meditated – with microphones and *gutkas* resting on bookstands in front of them. As the stroke of twelve was getting nearer, the singing passed into an intensive chanting of *Vahiguru* that created

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*simran* to the videotape in his absence. Whether live or on videocassette, the saintly person provides instructions.

<sup>552</sup> A similar practice is found among Vaishnava Hindus. In connection with major Hindu festivals, like Gayatri Jayanti, Vasant Panchami, etc., non-stop recitation of the name of Ram during selected periods of time, sometimes up to 21 or more days are arranged. These recitation events are often termed *maha yajna*, “the great sacrifice”, alluding to the Vedic fire sacrifice and intensive austerity practice that will burn off one’s karma. Keeping burning oil-lamps beside the practitioners symbolically represents this austerity. See e.g. *The Tribune* 2002-12-10, and the web site: [www.akhandjaap.com](http://www.akhandjaap.com).

a sonic atmosphere in the gurdwara. Without intermission the repetitions continued until twenty minutes into the New Year. Then they all stood up to read a supplication for peace and prosperity of the commenced year and concluded the celebration with the *Sukhasan* ceremony of Guru Granth Sahib. Most of the participants went home at about 01.00 in the night, but two middle-aged men and their sons decided to carry on with the practice until the break of *amritvela* one hour later. When I left Nichibagh Gurdwara that night only a murmuring sound from rapid repetitions of *Vahiguru* echoed from the Guru's house.

### 3.5. ARDAS – THE SIKH SUPPLICATION

Readings of the Sikh supplication *Ardas* virtually frame all religious events in the Sikh life. As many of my friends recurrently stated, “Everything begins and ends with an *Ardas*”, even human life itself. When a baby is born the text will be read for future protection and prosperity of the child, just like a last (*antim*) *Ardas* is recited for the peace of a departed soul after the cremation alongside the river Ganga. The reading of *Ardas* can be applied to almost any situation or event, feelings or wishes of individuals and families, and it is read in connection with all congregational activities.

Etymologically the word *Ardas* seems to be derived from the Persian *arzdasht*, meaning a written petition or appeal addressed to a superior authority.<sup>553</sup> According to McLeod (2003), the word *Ardas* has come to gain mainly three meanings in the Punjabi language: historically it was used in secular administrative contexts for a monetary contribution to a sovereign; within a religious framework the Sikh Gurus used the word for a supplication to God and it came to designate the act of laying a petition before the Guru; and in common parlance the word signifies a respectful request.<sup>554</sup> In terms of content *Ardas* is one of the few religious texts ceremonially performed that is not drawn from Guru Granth Sahib.

The standardized and sanctioned text in use today consists of two separate parts: the first is a prelude to the composition *Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki* (also called *Chandi di Var*) – a poem written as a trilogy about goddess Durga, which is included in Dasam Granth and dates back to the end of the seventeenth century. *Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki* is an invocation and tribute to the timeless God and all the human Sikh Gurus up to the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, since it is popularly believed that his son, Gobind Singh, was holding the pen. At some point in history, the preclusive extract reproduced in the Sikh supplication came to include the names of Gobind Singh and Guru Granth Sahib as well. The second part of the *Ardas* text is a much longer section, which epitomizes memorial events and deeds of faith and sacrifice in the Sikh history, and recounts symbols, places of worship, and values that are held significant in

<sup>553</sup> McGregor, 1997: 54. According to another etymology the term *Ardas* is derived from Sanskrit root *ard*, which means “to beg”, and *as* which signifies wishes, hope or desires (Bhupinder Singh 1999: 100).

<sup>554</sup> McLeod 2003: 194.



modern interpretations of the Sikh religion. This textual part hails the Khalsa community and supplicates for the preservation and divine protection of its ideals, virtues and institutions and at the end seeks the welfare and prosperity of the whole world. It is most probable that this text evolved sometime during the eighteenth century and in the course of time has undergone amendments.<sup>555</sup> The second half of *Ardas* text has been adapted to the modern history of Sikhs: it recalls the Gurdwara Reform Movement in the 1920s and the refugees who laid down their lives during the partition in 1947. The text in current use has been sanctioned by SGPC and is recorded in the normative *Sikh Rahit Maryada* from 1950.<sup>556</sup>

From a purely textual viewpoint, *Ardas* is thus a compilation of two separate texts, even if most Sikhs perceive the prayer as a complete whole. Due to the believed sacrosanct authorship of the prelude of the text some may even assign the whole *Ardas* a sacred status similar to that of *gurbani* texts. The supplication is learnt orally and in writing by means of religious handbooks (*gutkas*), which contain the daily liturgies (*nitnem*) including *Ardas* and other useful *gurbani* hymns in Gurmukhi or Devanagiri script. These handbooks usually render the text in verbatim, without commentaries or explanations, since *Ardas*, like *gurbani*, should be memorized and orally performed. It is more or less expected from *Amritdhari* Sikhs to be well acquainted with the texts and know it “by heart”, that is, be fluent in the reading and conduct the prayer at public functions. Within the gurdwaras it is generally the *granthi* who leads the congregation throughout a performance, while facing Guru Granth Sahib in a standing posture.

Local Sikhs also distinguish between the “whole” (*pura*) or “big” (*bara* [Hindi] or *vada* [Punjabi]) *Ardas* and the “small” (*choti*) *Ardas*. Whereas the former term refers to readings of the *Ardas* text in full, the latter signifies an abbreviated version which comprises the prefatory recounting of all the Sikh Gurus’ names and the last final part which apologizes for errors and seeks the welfare of the world. In the daily *Sukhasan* ceremony the shorter version is read by the *granthi* after the Guru Granth Sahib has been arrayed in clothes to the tunes of *Kirtan Sohila* and before the scripture is carried to the bedroom for rest. Individual Sikhs will similarly present *Choti Ardas* after they have completed the recitation of *Kirtan Sohila* at night. In the gurdwara the abbreviated supplication always requires a standing position, while the rules will be more relaxed in private settings.

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<sup>555</sup> See Bhupinder Singh 1999: 100. As McLeod argues, the opening part of the *Ardas* text, containing *Var Sri Bhagauti Ji Ki* and the additional lines with the names of Gobind Singh and Guru Granth Sahib, can be traced to the eighteenth for two reasons: the authors of the eighteenth century *rahit-nama* literature seem to be well acquainted with the meaning of *Ardas* and used the term in their writings. Secondly, since the Sikh supplication invokes *Bhagauti* – a goddess – it is more likely to be a product of the time before Singh Sabha influences in the nineteenth century (McLeod 2003: 195 – 196).

<sup>556</sup> *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, 1994: 9 – 11.

## LOCAL INTERPRETATIONS

Scholars sometimes observe that the *Ardas* text summarizes Khalsa standards and does not reflect the more diverse Sikhism. Seen from the perspective of the performance contexts, that is, in which settings and for whom *Ardas* is read, the supplication extends far beyond the segment of *Amritdhari* Sikhs who explicitly confirm to Khalsa standards. In the gurdwaras of Varanasi it is quite common to find *Amritdhari* Sikhs reading the congregational *Ardas* with Hindus, Sindhis, and Muslims side by side, who all jointly participate in religious services. The fact that the referential content of *Ardas* conveys normative Khalsa values does not pose any confessional dilemma to adherents of other religious traditions who have reverence for the Sikh tradition and faith in the Guru Granth Sahib. Participants do not need to personally believe in the normative Sikh values in order to take part in a prayer which communicates these values. Similarly, their individual intentions or motives for taking part in an *Ardas* reading do not affect the formal performance or the right to be present and partake in it. Locally and globally the reading of *Ardas* has become iconized as “the prayer” of the Sikhs and stands as an exemplification of Sikhism. To participate in this speech event generates illocutionary forces of affirming a connection with and respect for the Sikh history, community and the Guru Granth Sahib.

The popularity of the Sikh supplication among local Sikhs seems to be connected with strong religious beliefs related to the *Ardas* and multi-leveled functions attributed to the enactment of the text. Below I will quote a few expositions which some of my informants gave when they were invited to answer the question “What is an *Ardas*?”.

1. *A young female student*

*Ardas* is to remember God. We do it when something happens and in the daily ceremonies. On special occasions we get *Ardas* performed by the *granthi*.

2. *A young businessman*

It is the final stage of a *puja*. If I am doing *Ardas* I am asking God to help people, I ask for me also, to get strength so that I can do whatever I want to do.

3. *A young businessman*

The *Ardas* which comes from Amritsar is not fully correct. *Ardas* is a request that should come from the heart. This *Ardas* people do just by reading. The reading is not the request. Only in the last part of this *Ardas* people request from their heart.

4. *A young female student*

*Ardas* is to take the name of the ten Gurus, the remembering of them. We also remember the five beloved [*panj pyare*] who were created by

Guru Gobind Singh when he formed this community [*panth*]. We should remember the people who were martyrs for the religion and the country. We do *Ardas* for them to God.

5. *A middle-aged businessmen*

*Ardas* is everything. *Ardas* is like when you have eaten food but not taken any water, the food will not go into your body. We do the *Ardas* in front of God. In *Ardas* we tell what mistake we have made, forgive us for that and give us strength for the future.

6. *A middle-aged businessman*

*Ardas* is done in front of the feet of God and you ask for your own welfare and the welfare of the world. Have you listened to the last line, it goes: "Nanak ka nam chardi kala, tera bani sarbat da bhalla". Both good and bad people will get welfare, you ask for the welfare of people from any caste.

7. *A middle-aged housewife*

*Ardas* is remembering the God. If we are going out, or someone is sick, we do *ardas*. Everyday in the morning when we are doing *puja* then we do *Ardas*.

8. *A middle-aged businessman*

*Ardas* is for the welfare of everyone. When we go to school there will be a prayer, similar like that *Ardas* is a prayer. In all kinds of work there is *Ardas*. Before doing anything we take permission from God by an *Ardas*. Without *Ardas* the work is incomplete. *Ardas* completes things.

9. *A middle-aged businesswoman*

*Ardas* is prayer, it is recited from inside. After doing path you have to do *Ardas*. In *Ardas* there are the names of the ten Gurus. When we take their names, they are present. So we should be in attention.

10. *An elderly businesswoman*

*Ardas* means to pray and to give thanks. Guru Gobind Singh's deeds are in the *Ardas*, and we also give thanks to God for giving us all this. Whatever reading we have done, whatever time we have been giving to God, in the *Ardas* we say, please God accept my worship.

11. *An elderly man*

It is to take the name of the ten Gurus. All the Gurus and everyone are connected with God. The Gurus always told us to do prayer and by doing *Ardas* God will give success.

12. *An elderly businessman*

*Ardas* means to do prayer. I do *Ardas* twice a day: in the morning and the evening. In *Ardas* I always say, forgive me for my mischief and mistakes, give me happiness and peace [*sukhshanti*] and take care of my business and give welfare to all people, everyone and me. Nanak ji said that we should ask for the welfare of everyone. It is like an exclusive praying.

These verbal accounts indicate that the *Ardas* text and its performance comprise much more wider significations than the English word “prayer” generally would suggest. Many interlocutors frequently used the Hindi noun *binti*, or the Punjabi counterpart *benti*, meaning “request, supplication, prayer, entreaty, solicitation”,<sup>557</sup> synonymously to *Ardas*, or the Sanskrit word *prarthana*,<sup>558</sup> which encompasses similar connotations. Indeed the oral enactment of *Ardas* is regarded as a communication with a divine power – a respectful petition, prayer or request in which wishes, thanksgivings, pleadings for forgiveness, or appeals for permission to conduct any task may be imparted to God. Added to this, the performance is a memorial act of recalling the Sikh Gurus, the five beloved, the martyrs, freedom fighters and all who sacrificed their lives in the name of religion. The text is dedicated to them and participants should consequently recall and express gratitude for their deeds through the reading of *Ardas*. At the time it would be misleading to confine the local interpretations to didactic means for recollections of the past. As a few of interlocutors emphasized (answer 1, 4, 9, 11), verbalizing the text is *simran* – a devotional act of remembering God and the ten Gurus, which is considered a beneficial act in itself. The notion of *Ardas* as a practice of *simran* partly explains why so many people metaphorically or literally liken the event of *Ardas* performance to a royal reception at a divine court. It is to stand in a space within which a divine power is made present and all people are welcomed.

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<sup>557</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 627.

<sup>558</sup> McGregor 1997: 670.

### ATTENTIVE BODY POSTURE

The most distinct feature of congregational performances of the full *Ardas* lies in the formal properties of bodily gestures and speech acts that have gained a highly formalized character. During most ceremonies in the gurdwara or at home, people who are in the spatial presence of Guru Granth Sahib should always be seated and remain in a lower physical position than the scripture for the sake of reverence. In the enactment of *Ardas*, however, people depart from this behavioral rule and stand up with folded hands facing Guru Granth Sahib. With the exception of people who due to handicap, illness or old age cannot stand up, it applies to all participants. If no scripture is present people can face any direction or gather around the object of prayer, such as in the case of cremation ceremonies during which all mourners are standing in a circle around the pyre. In Sikh worship *Ardas* is one of the very few occasions when the whole assembly rises to an erect posture higher than the scripture. In conversations with *granthis* and lay Sikhs I was given various explanations as to why people should stand during *Ardas*. More spontaneously some would simply state that it is a tradition or just a fixed rule since long ago, while others described it as a habitual practice they have learnt from childhood. The *granthi* stated that the bodily behavior was simply due to the nature of the texts as an appeal:

During *Ardas* everyone stands because it is a request [*vinti*] to the Guru, to Guru Granth Sahib, for happiness and prosperity [*sukhsanpti*] and also for protection [*raksha*], so why everyone stands, it is pleading.

Figuratively speaking many would liken it to other “proper” conducts in the Indian public life and society, such as when a judge enters a courtroom, pupils’ attendance at school, attitudes towards elders, or when meeting anyone who belongs to a higher social strata. In any situation which involves interaction with a person of dignity and higher status, they will keep an erected posture to express reverence according to the cultural conventions. Standing in an upright position is an act of courtesy to superiors. Correspondingly, when the *Ardas* is being read, “We think that the Gurus are in front of us”, a middle-aged woman said. “We stand in the courtroom of God”, an older man put it. Many would say the reading evokes experiences of being in a divine presence, which entails these bodily postures. Irrespective of the different accounts, the course of action in the enactment of *Ardas* is stipulated: everyone stands during the reading of *Ardas*, preferably with folded hands and the face pointing downwards to express a humble attitude. When the reciter utters the final lines of the text all do *matha tekna* – facing the scripture they fall down on their knees with their foreheads touching the floor.

## STRUCTURE OF PERFORMANCES

Like many other verbal performances in Sikhism, the reading of *Ardas* presents a structure which contains other speech acts that should be executed within the framework of a performance. In congregational services Guru Amardas' hymn *Anand Sahib* (GGS p. 917), the "respectful bliss", is always sung prior to the actual reading of the *Ardas* text, often by professional musicians who lead the congregation in a choir singing. Out of forty stanzas of *Anand Sahib*, the first to the fifth, and the fortieth should be rendered to the tunes of a melody that most people easily recognize. Some laypersons held that the singing of *Anand Sahib* had a dual function of giving thanks to God and generating divine blessings – the former was accomplished by means of peoples' verbalization of the text and the latter through their audile perception of it. People may attribute the text *Anand Sahib* with similar positive qualities, saying more generally that it is beneficial and provides happiness (*kushi*). When the text is set to music in performance the melody is sung in major keys to create a pleasant atmosphere and enhance the aesthetic impression. The *granthis*' stated reason for including *Anand Sahib* before a reading of *Ardas* is that the hymn provides bliss and "assists" the supplication and the subsequent offering of the sacred pudding, which is always distributed in Sikh congregations. Reciting *Anand Sahib* is certainly a meritorious act in itself, but within the frame of Sikh liturgies it is often given this functional role of supporting other acts within the structure of ceremonies.

Just before the officiator in the gurdwara starts the reading of *Ardas* it is customary that he or she leads the whole assembly in singing the couplet *Ashtapadi* 4:8, which is drawn from Guru Arjan's beloved composition *Sukhmani Sahib* (GGS p. 268). This couplet contains the word "ardas" and is one of the hymns in Sikh scripture that are characteristically designed as a supplication to God.<sup>559</sup> One *granthi* in Varanasi alleged that *Ashtapadi* 4:8 is actually the "original" supplication due to its status of being included in the Guru Granth Sahib as Guru Arjan's own petition before God. The couplet reads as follows:

Thou art the Lord, I make this supplication unto Thee. My soul and body are all Thine capital. Thou art Mother and Father and we are Thine children. In Thine Grace lie many comforts. No one knows Thy limits. Thou, O Wealthy Lord, art the Highest of the high. The entire creation is strung on Thy thread. What has sprung from Thee, that is in

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<sup>559</sup> Individual Sikhs may utilize the term *Ardas* for whichever *gurbani* hymn from Guru Granth Sahib they choose and use as a supplication to God in their daily worship. A middle-aged Sikh woman, for instance, had combined two different verses of Guru Arjan and Guru Ramdas (GGS: 383, 735), which she referred to as *Choti Ardas*. The women held these verses powerful because they were supplications made by the Sikh Gurus. When reading she would keep wishes and requests within herself and not append any additional speech to verses. "Your feelings and desires can be different, but the hymns (*shabads*) remain the same", she said.

Thy command. Thine condition and extent, Thou alone knowest.  
Nanak, a slave of Thine is ever a sacrifice unto Thee.<sup>560</sup>

Most Sikhs are well-acquainted with the couplet and the melodious singing of it, which in the performance context works as a musical marker, signaling that a reading of *Ardas* will follow. The sound of this melody usually induces people to immediately take up a standing bodily posture. When the congregation stands with folded hands facing Guru Granth Sahib, the officiator usually begins with a verbal invocation, either by reciting one selected *gurbani* hymn that is appropriate for the occasion, or, as is more common in Varanasi, repeating the divine name (*Satnam Vahiguru*) a few times, before the actual reading starts. From the religious standpoint, this and similar verbal markers preceding *Ardas* and other performances are a type of *simran* intended to invoke the divine name and settle the human mind and heart on remembrance and meditation on God. The subsequent reading of the *Ardas* text will be divided into separate parts which are marked by the officiators' exhortation of "utter" (*bolo ji*), whereupon the entire congregation exclaims the gurmaṅtra – *Vahiguru!* Throughout the reading the leader is thus urging the participants to call out the divine name and receives a joint response from all present.

As with most sacred texts of the Sikhs, *Ardas* is read in a quoting manner. But contrary to other recitations the supplication affords an opportunity to express gratitude, wishes or requests from individuals or the community. The last part of the prayer supplies a break in the text, or a textual "opening", in which people may insert and present personal or collective petitions to God and additional *gurbani* verses appropriate for the particular occasion. Accordingly, when people are performing or arranging recitations or any other performance for some special cause or purpose, they may formulate these reasons in the Sikh prayer. In this way *Ardas* holds a significant instrumental function as it offers a way to verbally express the motives of religious action, or as a middle-aged woman put it: "When doing a *path* you have to do *Ardas*. If not, it is like writing a letter without mentioning the addressee - the letter won't reach." Because of the divine nature of *gurbani* texts they are always rendered in verbatim and do not allow for insertion of any verbal supplements of the performer. If the reciter wants to express or communicate personal wishes or reasons for conducting a recitation, she or he will have to add a performance of *Ardas* before and after the recitation. The textual opening at the end of the *Ardas* text allows for this communication. Consequently, any *gurbani* recitation is always embedded within a much wider performance structure and supplemented with an *Ardas* by means of which individuals or the community may express their motives and desired goals.

In the textual "opening" of *Ardas*, the *granthi* or the attendant in duty usually inserts one or several supplementary verses from the Guru Granth Sahib which are considered suitable and favourable for the cause of presenting the supplication. These supportive stanzas are always recited without any break prior to the presentation of

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<sup>560</sup> GGS: 268.

individual or communal reasons. The *granthis* may select the stanzas freely from Guru Granth Sahib and by years of practise they usually hold a repertory of memorized scriptural excerpts to be evoked in the various ceremonial contexts. To exemplify the method of selecting and inserting verses from the Sikh scripture, one of the *granthis* in Varanasi rendered a few passages which he used in *Ardas* performances in connection with ceremonies and special requests of community members. Basically this method is based on semantic identification between the content and meaning conveyed in the text and the situational context, in sense that the locutionary meaning of each verse should correspond with the activity for which the *Ardas* is read. Broadly he categorized the *gurbani* extracts into two major groups: hymns for times of happiness (*sukh*) and sadness (*dukh*), which were further divided into subcategories related to specific situations. Hymns for happiness could, for instance, be used for *Ardas* performances in wedding ceremonies, after childbirth, inaugurations of new homes or shops, or when family members celebrated birthdays. In all these ceremonial contexts he would use two different verses from the Guru Granth Sahib:

If the True Guru casts His merciful glance, I enjoy the happinesses of  
*laks* of empires. Were he to bless me with His Name even for a trice,  
my soul and body will become cool. They, who are so pre-ordained,  
hold fast to the feet of the True Guru.<sup>561</sup>

The heart, wherein the love of Lord God abides, is like the beauteous  
earth, studded with the gems of grass. Nanak, all the affairs become  
easy, when the great True Guru becomes pleased.<sup>562</sup>

Typically he interposed only the three first lines of the first verse when he performed *Ardas* for a newborn child, while he would read the two verses jointly at the time of wedding ceremonies. In times of sadness or when people were stricken with illness he used the following excerpts, drawn from three separate verses in the Guru Granth Sahib:

The Destroyer of sorrow is Thy Name, O Lord, the Destroyer of sor-  
row is Thy Name. Throughout the eight watches of the day visualise  
over the Divine comprehension imparted by the Perfect True Guru.<sup>563</sup>

Thou blestest the poor with wealth, Oh Lord. Through Thee manifold  
sins are washed off and the soul becomes immaculate. Through Thee

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<sup>561</sup> GGS: 44.

<sup>562</sup> GGS: 322.

<sup>563</sup> GGS: 218.



all the desires and tasks are accomplished. O God, Thy saint, Thou  
blessest with Thine Name.<sup>564</sup>

The Guru rids man of the afflictions of births over births and lend  
support to the dried up soul. Having his vision, the mortal is blest and  
dwell he on the God's name.<sup>565</sup>

The event of death was also included in the category of sadness. The *granthi* plays an important role in death ceremonies and is responsible for *Ardas* readings before and after the cremation. In these situations he mainly used one hymn of Guru Tegh Bahadur, included at the very end of the Sikh scripture:

Only then one should worry, if a thing, not expected to happen, comes  
to pass. This is the way of the world. None is ever stable, O Nanak.  
Whosoever is born, he must perish. Every one shall fall today or to-  
morrow. Nanak, sing thou the Lord's praises and lay aside all other en-  
tanglements.<sup>566</sup>

Any of these lines could be used in *Ardas* performances at the cremation ground or in memorial services in the gurdwara, but for most part he would use only the two last lines.

The method of choosing separate verses from the Guru Granth Sahib for inclusion in the textual opening of *Ardas* is in no way exceptional for the *granthis*. In daily life lay Sikhs read the *Ardas* text after each *gurbani* recitations in the morning and evening and include additional verses or lines from the Sikh scripture according to individual choosing. An elderly *Amritdhari* woman, for instance, was very fond of the following hymn composed by Guru Arjan:

Within home and without, I have Thine support, O Lord. Thou art ever with  
Thy slave. O my Beloved Lord, take pity on me, that I may utter God's Name  
with love. The Lord is the only support of His slave. Whatever Thou doest or  
causeth to do, O Lord, in that I deem my welfare to life. Pause. The Lord is my  
honour, the Lord is my emancipation, and merited gospel of the World Cher-  
isher is my wealth. Slave Nanak seeks the protection of the Lord God's feet,  
this way of life he has learnt from the saints.<sup>567</sup>

She had memorized the whole hymn and interposed it in the textual opening of her daily prayers. An elderly Sikh man, who frequently emphasized the importance of

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<sup>564</sup> GGS: 1146.

<sup>565</sup> GGS: 618.

<sup>566</sup> GGS: 1429.

<sup>567</sup> GGS: 677.

expressing gratitude and submitting oneself to God, had memorized four lines of two separate hymns by the fifth Guru, which he occasionally included in his *Ardas*:

Have mercy on me, O Beneficent to the meek and consider not all my merits and demerits. How can the dust be washed? Such is the state of the man, O my Lord.<sup>568</sup>

Whatever I ask of my Lord, exactly that He blesses me with. Whatever the Lord's slave Nanak utters with his mouth, proves to be true both here and hereafter.<sup>569</sup>

In any of these examples the inserted *gurbani* stanza is always uttered in the form of a shorter quotation before the reader presents the requests or motives for performing *Ardas*.

Depending on the contexts for which the *Ardas* is read, the officiator continues with a shorter or longer recitative speech that will clarify for whom and which reasons the prayer is conducted. The break allows for verbal articulation of subjective wishes and thus provides a significant communicative function of *Ardas* performances. Generally speaking, the types of speeches presented within the textual opening can be declarative, commissive and expressive. When the *Ardas* is performed in the beginning and end of a larger ceremony the officiator will declare which *gurbani* hymns will or have been recited and the work which will begin or has just been completed. The proclamation may encompass all acts contained in a ceremony and recognize the human agents who have answered for the separate enactments. The *sevadars* are thanked for preparing food, *pathis* for conducting readings, the sponsors for financial assistance, just like the congregation in its entirety may be thanked. At the same time the imposed speech is commissive, in the sense that it guarantees the undertaking of the stated obligations. People should intend to do what they present in *Ardas* readings. Among the Sikhs there is a general conception that all religious action – verbal and non-verbal – must be pronounced in an initial and finalizing *Ardas*, or otherwise left undone. If a *gurbani* recitation or a religious speech to the congregation, for instance, is not articulated in a communal *Ardas* within the framework of a ceremony it should be cancelled or postponed. Stances like this are associated with religious notions of *Ardas* as a human-divine communication through the agency of the Guru. Recitations of particular *gurbani* hymns or the entire Sikh scripture should be verbally articulated in the textual opening of the *Ardas* text as an “offering” to the Guru. The declaration of action which is about to occur implies an obligation of conduct since these acts are considered to receive sanction from the Guru by means of the reading of *Ardas*. The communicative feature of *Ardas* becomes more explicit in cases where individuals or families arrange the reading for highly personal

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<sup>568</sup> GGS: 882.

<sup>569</sup> GGS: 681.

reasons and motives. In the textual opening they will impart private requests and set up “contracts” with god, that is, they promise to go on pilgrimages, donate money, recite hymns, or do some other reciprocal act, if God will assist them. In these instances the textual opening of *Ardas* provides an opportunity to present human needs in a particular life situation and formulate requests for divine support. When the *granthi* carries out the supplication on behalf of an individual, a family, or the congregation, he may convey personal data of the clients and express their feelings. The technique of inserting personal information was exemplified by a performance which a local *granthi* did for me when I was leaving Varanasi in 1999. Initially he presented my first name and native country and explained that I had been staying with the Sikh community for my studies. He continued to state the situational reason for presenting the *Ardas* – I was returning home – and then pleaded for protection of me and my family, success in my work, and finally requested that I would get an opportunity to return to India in the nearest future. In a similar fashion, the officiator may identify the requesting client and pronounce requests or feelings in highly personal terms.

When the appended recitations and speeches are completed, the officiator immediately goes back to read the last lines of the prefixed *Ardas* text, in which he firstly asks forgiveness for all errors and shortcomings while reciting *gurbani* and finally utters the very last and popular line wishing humanity well: *Nanak Nam chardi kala tere bhane sarbat ka bhalla* – “May Your Name be exalted, and may all prosper according to Your will”. At this juncture all participants will go down on their knees for *matha tekna* or touch the ground with their hands in acts of reverence.

The conclusion of *Ardas* performance in the gurdwara is marked by the singing of an anthem glorifying Khalsa. This postlude is either called *Dohra* after its metrical form of rhyming couplets, or is simply recognized by the famous line *Raj karega Khalsa* – “The Khalsa shall rule”. Considering that this text encapsulates ideas about Khalsa sovereignty and acknowledges Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru, the anthem is believed to be authentic *gurbani* ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh. In total the sacred song comprises four different couplets, of which the first three find references in historical Sikh sources:

Verily by the order of God the immortal was the panth promulgated. It is incumbent upon all the Sikhs to regard the Granth as their Guru.

Regard the Granth as the Guru, the manifest body of the Gurus. Those who desire to be united with God may find Him in the Sabda, the holy word.

The Khalsa shall rule and none will remain defiant; all such shall come into the fold after wandering in humiliation. All who take refuge (in the Panth) shall be protected.<sup>570</sup>

The Name of *Vahiguru* is the ship; those who go aboard will reach the store. The Guru can take those who serve with devotion across.<sup>571</sup>

Grewal (1997) observes that the first and the second couplet are found in the nineteenth century poem *Panth Prakash* (1878), composed by Giani Gian Singh who also appraised the two couplets as real words or utterance of the Guru (*srimumkhvak*).<sup>572</sup> The first couplet also appears as verse number thirty in a *Dohara* included in *Prahlad Rai Rahit-nama*, a manual of the Sikh code of conduct dated 1696.<sup>573</sup> The third couplet containing the phrase “Raj karega Khalsa” is apparently of a similar age and is derived from the closing hymn of *Tanakhah Nama* – a manual of penances dated to the beginning of the eighteenth century. This text is attributed to Bhai Nandlal Goya, a Persian poet and disciple of Guru Gobind Singh, who claims that the manual was “issued from the mouth of the tenth King.”<sup>574</sup> The fourth couplet is probably a later addition with no authentic source.<sup>575</sup> The melodious singing of these couplets will mark the end of a completed performance of *Ardas*.

Figure 20. THE STRUCTURE OF ARDAS PERFORMANCES

LINGUISTIC ACTS	PARA-LINGUISTIC ACTS
1. Stanza 1 – 5, 40, from <i>Anand Sahib</i>	
2. <i>Ashtapadi</i> 4:8 from <i>Sukhmani Sahib</i>	People rise to a standing position with folded hands
3. <i>Gurmantra</i> or optional <i>gurbani</i> hymn	
4. Reading of the <i>Ardas</i> text	
5. Inclusion of speeches and optional <i>gurbani</i> hymns	
6. Reading of the <i>Ardas</i> text continues	People perform <i>matha tekna</i> when reading the last lines of the <i>Ardas</i> text
7. Khalsa ovation	People rise to a standing position
8. Sikh <i>jaikara</i>	
9. Singing of <i>Dohra/Raj Karega Khalsa</i>	People perform <i>matha tekna</i>
10. Khalsa ovation	People sit down

<sup>570</sup> The translation of the first three couplets is derived from Grewal 1997: 441. For alternative translations, see Bhupinder Singh 1999, McLeod 1984.

<sup>571</sup> Translation by Harpreet Bajwa.

<sup>572</sup> Grewal 1997: 441.

<sup>573</sup> McLeod 2003: 71, 289.

<sup>574</sup> McLeod 2003: 68 – 69, 285. The authorship of *Tanakhah-nama* has also been questioned by Sikh scholars (Bhupinder Singh 1999: 101, ft.3).

<sup>575</sup> Grewal 1997: 441.

The rendering of *Ardas* thus stands as a distinct whole, separated from other discourses, with recognizable opening and closing sequences (See Figure 20). The different linguistic acts contained in the structure of a performance go by individual names and frame the actual reading in different layers. While *Anand Sahib* and *Ash-tapadi* 4:8 (1+2) and the *Dohra* (9) provide a broader performance frame, the *gurmantra* (3) and Sikh *jaikara* (8) are verbal markers embedding quotations of the *Ardas* text. To mark out the completion of a rendering at the very end, people will exclaim the Khalsa ovation (*Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki Fateh*). These boundary-marking verbal acts have a meta-communicative function to announce that what is to come and what has been ended is different from everyday talk. Although the verbal performance of the Sikh supplication presents itself as a formalized and structured event which comprises stipulated acts to be carried out in a prescribed way independently from the actors' intentions, the communicative function of *Ardas* performances is established by the textual "opening" at the end of the text. In this opening people may add *gurbani* hymns deemed favourable for a particular event and speeches in which they express their wishes and reasons for devotional activities. Given this communicative feature the performance of *Ardas* is usually integrated in larger Sikh ceremonies and is attributed various instrumental, transformative, and confirmative functions by its location and relation to other devotional acts. The prayer is not merely a tool for conveying human wishes and feelings to a divine receiver, but becomes a means by which Sikhs present offerings to the Guru and God, create sacred time and space, and even transform properties of material objects.

### 3.6. SEVA – SELFLESS SERVICE

On a November night in 2000 a group of local Sikhs arranged what they called "milk-seva" at Varanasi railway station for a group of Sikh pilgrims travelling from the Punjab on the express train *Akal Takht* to the pilgrimage centre of Patna Sahib. When the train arrived after two o'clock in the morning, the Varanasi group was saluting the pilgrims loudly by repeatedly crying the Sikh *jaikara*. For the few minutes the train waited at the station buckets of milk and parcels with sweets were freely distributed in a coach crammed with people seated on benches and the floor reciting *gurbani*. As the train departed, all participants repeatedly shouted out the Sikh salutation, which thereby framed the nightly operation of selfless service to the holy congregation.

In both Hindi and Punjabi language the noun *seva* meaning "service" is given various secular and religious connotations. The word can mean attendance and care of parents and people in general, free and voluntary service to the society and country, or altruistic actions in devotion and worship to a spiritual preceptor or deity. The noun *sevak* signifies the agent of these acts; the attending person or devotee who humbly subordinates herself to serve and honour the subject of veneration. In the

everyday social life performing *seva* implies moral values and cultural conventions of keeping respectful behaviour towards elders and parents in particular, treating visiting guests “like Gods”, and in general behaving decently and humbly to people in the society. A middle-aged shopkeeper in Varanasi compared *seva* to customer service: even if a client does not buy anything he should treat him with respect and politeness, because “maybe he will come back to my shop and buy some other time, and that would be the benefit of my *seva*,” he said.

An inventory of the activities that the notion of *seva* may encompass within the religious framework would be endless. When Sikhs are representing the significations and manifestations of *seva* in the Sikh tradition, they quite often resort to the social and philanthropic aspects of Sikhism. A wide range of institutionalized forms of *seva* in the Sikh life today, such as public food distribution, orphanages, schools, medical services, relief work and other charities, exemplify the various ways in which doctrines of egalitarianism and philanthropy, intrinsic to the Sikh religion, are embodied in social institutions and practical work. Emic elucidations will quickly point out representational or symbolic aspects of Sikh ethics: performing *seva* signifies equality between humans, irrespective of social, religious or ethnic belonging, and the moral obligation of Sikhs is to strive for justice and betterment of the whole society. In Sikh discourses *seva* as selfless action to the community and the wider society are framed by references to key doctrines in *gurbani* and narrative anecdotes on the Sikh Gurus and devout disciples to validate implementations of these doctrines. The practice of *seva* is seen as an embodiment of the oft-quoted credo and guiding principle of Guru Nanak: *nam japo, kirat karo, vand chakko* – “recite the name of God, work hard, divide and share with others”. Although scholars in general would agree that the Sikh perception of *seva* involves orientations, actions, and discourses to be understood within a larger historical and religious framework, the various religious meanings Sikhs may attribute to *seva* in thoughts and deeds have been fairly understated in scholarly studies.<sup>576</sup> To be content with symbolic interpretations would be to neglect the religious aspects embedded in contemporary practices and perceptions of *seva*.

In a local setting like Varanasi *seva* is considered to be far more than social activities in a philanthropic spirit for the purpose of representing Sikh ethics and doctrines in action. The various types of *seva* which people perform individually or collectively are means to realizing and manifesting the Gurus’ teaching in the social world and are nonetheless acts of worship and complete surrender to the Guru and God. When the respondents of the structured interviews described the most significant acts to do during festivals and in the daily life of a gurdwara all of them mentioned *seva* as a religious action they attached with various spiritual and soteriological significations. To be a humble servant for the Guru and the congregation or do altruistic work for the society is the paradigmatic way to shield and purify the human mind/heart from the five vices (*vikar*) – lust, wrath, avarice, worldly attachments, and particularly arrogance, which persistently seduces humans from remembrance of

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<sup>576</sup> One exception is Murphy 2004.

God. *Seva* has power to cultivate humility and godly virtues in the personal character that will generate merits for the future and bring people closer to God. Given these capacities, the performance of *seva* is said to pacify emotions and confer inner peace whenever a distressing situation arises in everyday life. In one conversation, for instance, a male informant described an argument over money he had with his mother-in-law one evening. The discussion made him enraged and sleepless in the night. The next morning, however, he started to do *seva* in the gurdwara by cleaning dishes and shoes and, as he said, “after a little while my heart regained peace”.

To local Sikhs the notion of *seva* is clearly discernable from other social activities owing to the inherently different qualities of this action which are determined and measured by three principal factors: the intentions and feelings of the actor in the moment he or she perform acts, for whom the acts are directed, and which type of action is carried out. All the factors are important for categorizing an action as *seva*, even though the first one – the actor’s intentions and feelings – is unquestionably held to be the most decisive.

#### INNER FEELINGS AND DEVOTION

Irrespective of the prior motives people may have for engaging in actions labelled *seva*, the person performing acts should try to uphold a few stances or attitudes towards his or her own action: the work must be *nishulk* – voluntary acts not subject to charge, and *nishkam* – selfless acts performed without attachment to desires or thoughts of reward. The latter one, *nishkam*, refers to a condition or attitude which the individual takes up in the moment of action. He or she should virtually drain the human mind and heart (*man*) from desires that serve selfish purposes, even if there may very well be underlying causes and prior intentions that motivated the conduct of *seva* in the first place. To qualify action as “successful” (*safal*) *seva*, a selfless attitude in the moment of conducting acts is a requirement. The inherently human vices and desires arising from egoism hold the human mind snared to worldly attachments and one way to break free from this entanglement is to intentionally remove thoughts and feelings that are selfish in character. This idea also explains why *seva* should be *nishulk* or voluntary and unpaid: desire for material gains is one of the strongest vices in humans that lead them astray from the spiritual path. Greediness, arrogance, and pride have power to diminish, even destroy the positive values of work if the human mind/heart is not being controlled. My interlocutors gave examples of how selfishness may vent itself in peoples’ outward behaviour even when they are conducting *seva*. “If there is *seva* of cleaning dishes people take part in that just so other people can see them,” an elderly Sikh man commented. Ostentatious conducts are held to be a major obstacle for the success of *seva*. A younger Sindhi man explicated this further, “When people are doing *seva* in the gurdwara, making *langar* or cleaning, others will say, ‘look how much *seva* that person is doing’. The feeling of pride comes in them and the value of *seva* is lost.” In *nishkam seva*, on the contrary, the mind of the actor should fully concentrate on the work at hand without thinking of the results or fruits

of action and remain unmoved by evaluations and comments of other people. "Your right hand should not even know what your left hand has done," an elderly man phrased.

To keep this internal disposition does not mean that the human mind/heart is totally emptied from feelings and thoughts in the ideal performance of *seva*. Quite on the contrary, successful *seva* is founded on other cognitive and affective capacities of humans which have power to remove selfishness and shield from evil vices. A young Sikh woman said:

If you make chapatis, but your thoughts are somewhere else, that *seva* would not be considered as successful (*safal*). You have to make chapatis with the feeling that God will eat them. *Seva* should be done with feelings, but without any desires.

Foundational for all kinds of manifestations of selfless service is kindness and affection – the very root of charity. It is to act with affection, and to feel joy and honour in work to help others. Love and compassion (*daya*) for all humans and animals in the world is from a Sikh point of view especially regarded as a godly virtue which becomes epitomized and embodied in *seva*. The actor's individual dedication and commitment are held crucial for the quality of *seva*. Selfless service can never be performed by external force but are acts of volition that emerge from feelings in the human mind/heart. In discussions on this theme many informants utilized the word *bhavana*, a noun which in this conversational context signifies "feeling" or "devotion" that generates interest in *seva*. This feeling is located in the human heart, which should be truthful and sincere. To decide upon performing *seva* is often explicated in terms of an inner commitment that people do to themselves and in front of God: "I say, today I have to do this in front of God. My heart is telling me to do this," a young Sikh man said. It is to be mentally and emotionally sincere in action and commit to the task at hand. Devotional people continually engaged in worship and selfless services are reckoned to have developed *seva bhav*, the "spirit of *seva*" and are delight in conducting *seva* for its own sake. The spirit of *seva* is driven by dedication: "I just feel that I have to do *seva*, I go to the gurdwara and do *seva* by my heart. In that I do not keep any limitation," an elderly woman said. Many talked of *seva bhav* as a spiritually progressed disposition of the human mind/heart from which action and feelings emerge and make you "offer everything to God". From this viewpoint the validation of the religious values of *seva* is more affective rather than cognitive. An intellectual understanding of the qualities which *seva* should have is not considered enough. The perfect devotee will instead conduct successful *seva* and derive full benefits from it because he or she has completely surrendered to the Guru and the will of God and intuitively feels love and compassion for humanity. True devotion and submission to the Guru and God makes people take honour in selfless acts to society, and the more joy the worshipper takes in *seva* the more awakened his or her soul is considered to be. Quite often Sikhs will couple the notion of *seva* with that of *simran*, remembrance



of the divine name, to emphasize the devotional foundation. The continuous meditation on God and repetition of the divine name has power to transform the quality and properties of ordinary acts to beneficial acts of *seva*. A meal prepared in meditation on God or while silently or verbally reciting *gurbani* is believed to become imbued with spiritual properties from the devotional stance of the actor. The devotee should consequently empty action of selfishness to make inner feelings of devotion to God and compassion to fellow creatures the driving force of action.

My interlocutors were of quite different opinions as to whether a person will benefit from *seva* performed in ostentation or for purely selfish reasons. An elderly man, for instance, was of the strong opinion that *seva* “just for showing” without true feelings (*bhavana*) would not generate any spiritual benefits. A woman of the same age took an opposite view. She distinguished between action that emerges from interest and feelings from the “inside”, and bodily action from the “outside”, which is “false” and short-lived in the sense that “you will do it for a little while and then give it up.” As she argued, even people who are doing “false” *seva* will indeed profit, but not to the same extent as those who act with inner commitment. At the end, the question of what *seva* is depends on the internal disposition of the worshipper in the moment of action and the validation of “successful” *seva* is an individual matter between human and God.

#### ACTION FROM MIND, BODY, AND WEALTH

When describing different actions which may be classified as *seva* local Sikhs will distinguish between three main categories: action from the human mind/heart (*man ki seva*); bodily or physical work (*tan ki seva*) conducted by human hands and feet; and finally donations of money or material offerings (*dhan ki seva*). The first category generally refers to *seva bhav* discussed above – the wish of one’s inner mind/heart to do selfless *seva* with commitment and devotion without selfish thoughts of worldly gains. Moreover, the notion of “mental *seva*” may comprise all internal devotional activities that worshippers accomplish from a sincere heart/mind, including remembrance of the godly name (*simran*), prayers (*Ardas*), and readings of *gurbani* verses (*path*). In fact, most of the performers in the gurdwaras of Varanasi view their exegetical expositions and musical performances as a type of *seva* to the Guru and the community. Even listening to *kirtan* was termed by some individuals as *seva*, since listening is a mental action to take an active part in the content communicated. It is to sacrifice time in order to be immersed in devotion and contemplation on God.

*Tan ki seva* or “*seva* of the body”, on the other hand, is to place manpower, time, and sometimes professional expertise at disposal to perform different kinds of deeds that will benefit the community and the broader society. This action may include everything from daily duties of cutting vegetables and scrubbing floors to work for medical and educational institutions. To perform acts with one’s own body, and particularly works that in an everyday context would be regarded degrading to one’s social status, is often commended as *vishesh seva*, or *seva* given “special” positive reli-

gious value since it cultivates humility that has the power to eliminate egoism. “Making *prashad* or whatever *seva* with your own hands without thinking about what other people will say, that will be the most virtuous *seva*,” an elderly Sikh woman said. Over and again my informants emphasized that works which in the wider society are suggestive of low status and impurity, such as storing and cleaning other peoples’ shoes, picking up and washing “tasted” plates, and cleaning the floors inside the gurdwara, are the most fruitful and merit-bestowing types of *seva*. As they explained, this evaluation involves two ways of conceiving acts performed in the house of the Guru: when people whose perception is colored by the norms of the broader society observe a man cleaning the shoes of other people, they will condescend him and pity his low status. To true devotees, on the other hand, the man is considered the “best dressed” in the Guru’s court and will be praised for the humble work he is doing. From the viewpoint of devotees, socially discriminating norms and values in the outside society are reversed to an asymmetrical value system within the space of the gurdwara in order to express complete surrender and subordination to the Guru. Yet the appreciation of bodily *seva* performed by individual Sikhs is often measured in relation to the social rank and status he or she possesses in the surrounding society. When people realize that a man of high social rank and financial status is cleaning shoes in the gurdwara, he is regarded as extremely humble and polite, just because he is doing a job that stands in opposite to what is expected from the social strata he belongs to in ordinary life.

Comprised in the notions of bodily *seva* is the term *karseva*, which is a collective gathering of devotees for voluntary service, especially for assignments that demand a great deal of labour, like dredging, refurbishing or constructing religious sites.<sup>577</sup> In Varanasi, *karseva* campaigns have been organized more occasionally. Subsequent to the arrival of Sikhs from West Punjab after 1947 the local committee undertook *karseva* for reconstructing the two gurdwaras. One elderly man remembered that all Sikh merchants in the area of Nichibagh kept their shops closed daily for three hours in the afternoon to jointly go to the gurdwara for voluntary work. The committee invited paid structural engineers to provide the technical expertise, while community members accounted for the hard work.

*Karseva* can also be undertaken to assist other religious communities. In Varanasi the yearly monsoon rain normally makes river Ganga overflow its banks and brings huge masses of mud. When the water level sinks in the autumn the ghats are virtually covered with thick layers of solidified mud. As the celebration of *Karttik Purnima* (November) was approaching in 1999 the mud banks posed a problem for the Hindu population of Varanasi. By tradition Hindu residents will decorate the stone stairs on the ghats leading down to river Ganga with thousands of oil lamps in the evening of the full moon day. This year all stairs along the stretch between Raj Ghat in the north and Pandey Ghat close by the main ghat were virtually buried in

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<sup>577</sup> See Kaur, P. & Singh, V. 1998. For a discussion on Sikh *karseva* organizations in India and the Diaspora, and the interaction between the two, see Murphy 2004.

heavy mud. When Sikhs became aware of the problem they took action. One week before the festival the gurdwara management hired paid labourers who, daily between 6 am and 8 pm, sluiced the banks and dug out stairs. The gurdwara arranged *karseva* for students at the two Khalsa schools in Gurubagh and Shivpur. On the Wednesday and Sunday preceeding the full-moon day all the school children were transported to the riverbank to participate in voluntary work. In exchange for tea and cookies the children were hoeing and shovelling mud to restore six steps at Pandey Ghat. Cognizant of the importance of *Karttik Purnima* in Varanasi the cleaning of the riverbank was an effort of goodwill to maintain amicable relationships with the Hindu neighbors. Simultaneously the collective relief action was used as means to infuse the younger Sikh generation with the feeling for *seva bhav*.

*Seva* as the act of giving monetary donations and other alms takes various expressions in the Sikh life. As a conventional rule, Sikhs never enter the gurdwara empty-handed. At least a few coins should be put in the collection box that is placed in front of the scriptural throne when paying respect to Guru Granth Sahib. To give *dasvandh*,<sup>578</sup> a tithe of one's salary or profit to social and communal charity work, is a moral obligation that local Sikhs should try to observe in their daily life. *Dasvandh* comprises of everything from the smaller amounts that individuals donate to the Guru's place on daily visits to large monetary transactions to the community or other religious and secular charity organizations. "By giving donations a person should not think that I am getting less, but I will gain more... savings will come," a middle-aged Sikh man said. A monetary gift in the name of *seva* should be seen as an investment for the future. The whole Sikh community in Varanasi is in fact built up on this monetary *seva*. Wealthier members and traders – men and women – may present the gurdwara with one of their monthly salaries as *seva*, or deposit parts of their profit for social work, just as housewives donate costly jewellery to the gurdwara. Before festivals and other religious programs committee members will organize fund-raising drives, where community members go from shop to shop collecting money. Some families have established customs of assuming full responsibility for supplying particular provisions to the gurdwara as an act of *seva* in memory of a deceased family member.<sup>579</sup> During the celebrations of Guru Nanak's and Guru Gobind Singh's birthdays, for instance, the community organizes public distribution of food to 5000 – 8000 people. On these occasions one to three families will take care of the expenditures of food, which amount to around 50000 rupees, either by monetary donations or by offering provisions.<sup>580</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> *Dasvandh* is also explicated as an offering of time to religious worship. One of the local *granthis* said, "Guru Maharaj ji said that you have to give a tenth of your twenty-four hours and of your earnings for donations. It is 2½ hours of the twenty-four hours you have to give to *simran*."

<sup>579</sup> A Sindhi man who owned a local Silk house was held in high esteem for his commitment of regularly bringing vegetables for *langar* for almost fifty years.

<sup>580</sup> On the day of Guru Arjan's martyrdom the distribution of sweetened water (*mitha jal*) costs around 25000 rupees and is paid by donations. Anyone who wishes to pay for *langar* tells the manager of the gurdwara who will put his or her name on a list. Community members can also

Although community members are free to choose whether they want to publicly announce their donations or not, pecuniary gifts should preferably be “secret donations” (*gupt dan*), given in concealment without exposing the identity of the donor. The reason for this is simply that the act of giving in general, and the repute from donating large amounts in particular, is held to delude people into self-conceit and pride – the very opposite to the reasons for conducting *seva* in the first place. On a note of irony, a *granthi* paid attention to the common practice of inscribing the white marble walls of the gurdwara and *Nishan Sahib* with the name of wealthy donors in black colours: “People who put black colours on religious places, how much black are they from inside?” These and similar expressions underline the moral value of not



Performing *seva* in the communal kitchen

undertaking monetary *seva* in an ostentatious manner, even if people will take up different attitudes to the norm and sometimes give generous donations to enhance the social prestige and reputation of the family.<sup>581</sup> Business-minded sponsors do not hesitate to put up advertisements about their companies or shops whenever *seva* is conducted in their name in the outside society. Still the publicity of wealthy sponsors quite often

entails moral evaluations in discourses within the community. An anonymous benefactor, whose identity at some point is disclosed, is likely to be held in higher esteem for his or her humble acting in concealment. And people do keep their donations secret. When a costly golden *kalash*, a rounded pinnacle on the top of the palanquin protecting Guru Granth Sahib, was presented to Gurubagh Gurdwara in 2001, the donor remained nameless, even at its ceremonious inauguration on the day of Guru Gobind Singh’s birthday. To exemplify the idea of *gupt dan*, my interlocutors said that not even their own spouses or children were cognizant of the donations their family presented to the gurdwara. In some cases the children get to know only after the death of their parents what the family had secretly donated. Husband and wife would give *gupt dan* separately, not knowing what the other was offering from his and her pocket.

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buy large quantities of flour, vegetables, lentils and sugar to be handed over to the gurdwara kitchen before the festival days.

<sup>581</sup> The names of families who sponsor larger events in the gurdwara and do not specifically request anonymity are mentioned in the public *Ardas* at the end of the program. One family member is also offered a *saropa*, robe of honour, in presence of the *sangat*.

Although the perfect devotee should ideally perform *seva* from mind/heart (*man*), body (*tan*) and money (*dhan*), the three different categories of services are adjustable to the individual ability and life situation. In case a person is wealthy but lacks time he or she may donate money and employ paid labour to do the physical work. Contracted *seva* can be used for larger enterprises which require expertise knowledge or large workloads and will grant benefits to the donor. Even though it is certainly more merit-bestowing to conduct work with one's own body, people would argue that they do another type of *seva* for the society by providing poor people with jobs. The religious value of *seva* is, as we shall see, not merely determined by the type of work conducted, but also the location of work and for whom it is directed.

### FOR THE GURU, SANGAT, AND SOCIETY

*Seva* can be conducted anywhere and be directed to anyone as long as it contains the element of selfless deeds that in some way or another benefit other humans and even animals.<sup>582</sup> But there are certain types of *seva* regarded to be charged with more spiritual values than others.

*Gurseva*, or *seva* for the Guru enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib, is held to be the most virtuous and merit-bestowing kind of action. On elderly man asserted that *seva* conducted without greed in *guru-ghar*, or "the house of the Guru", will release humans from the cycle of births and deaths and safely carry the soul to the abode of truth after death.<sup>583</sup> During my fieldwork an aged Sikh man from Sonapura used to come daily to Nichibagh Gurdwara at five in the morning to perform this *seva*. After a customarily respectful prostration to the Guru-scripture, he brought up fresh water from the well, dusted the four-poster bed in *tapasthan* and cleaned all doors, windows and the floors in front of the chamber. The final stage was to wash the tray on which

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<sup>582</sup> *Seva* may be addressed to animals. I Varanasi some families commemorate the death of Sant Sundar Lal Singh, a saint who ran a *dehra* in Alibeg (East Punjab) before the partition. Apart from his devoted work for the community, manifested in *prachar* and arrangement of *Akhand Path* among other things, Sant Sundar Lal Singh took special care of animals, which he called "gentlemen" (*bhala admi*). His affectionate relationship with animals was so strong that when he passed away the animals sacrificed their lives too.

<sup>583</sup> People may have dreams in which God gives instructions on *seva* in the Guru's place. A middle-aged woman said: "There are many people who dream about God. In their dreams they hear God telling them to do *seva*. Already from the next day they will start to do *seva* without accepting anything for the work. One lady I know had a dream like this. God told her that she must take care of a gurdwara in Punjab. She moved to Punjab directly." *Seva* for other religious shrines is also valued. During the celebration of Ravidas birthday in February 2001, for example, the local Sikhs assisted the Ravidas community with the transportation of pilgrims and lent scriptures, *palkis* and reciters for the two weeks long series of *Akhand path* at Ravidas Mandir. One Sikh informant said he always participated in the yearly *seva* of whitewashing the walls of the Hindu temple Sankat Mochan Mandir.

an oil-lamp was burning and light two additional lamps, whereupon he sat down, facing *tapasthan*, to meditate and recite *gurbani*. Each morning this highly formalized routine took him about thirty to forty minutes to complete.

In view of the twin concept of the Guru embodied in the Guru Granth Sahib and the *satsangat* – holy congregation of Sikhs – the notion of *gurseva* may encompass a wide range of services for the scripture as well as religious, social and educational activities for the congregation. The paradigm for *gurseva* involves a hierarchal social relationship between the Guru and devotees, in which the ideal devotee humbly gives action, wealth, inner thoughts, even completed recitations, to the Guru. The devotee is expected to surrender before the Guru and provide ministration and offerings, preferably without any thoughts of gaining something in return. “You should obey and do *seva* to the one you consider your Guru,” a *granthi* epitomized the idea of *Guru bhakti*, or devotion of the Guru. To religious Sikhs the daily ministration of Guru Granth Sahib is the means to express devotion, submission, and loyalty to the superior Guru dwelling in the scripture. Services intended to please and honour the Guru are the binding force between the Guru and devotees in enduring social relationships. A young Sikh businessman, who observed a daily routine of conducting *gurseva* in the gurdwara, spoke of the scripture as a living Guru who instructed him on what to do:

I promise that I will do *seva* every day in Nichibagh. If I can’t do *seva* I feel like I have been injured or hurt. But when I do any of kind of *seva* I feel inner satisfaction. Whenever I go there [to the gurdwara] the Guru shows me what kind of *seva* I should do. I will put the *rumala* straight if they are not properly arranged. If there is dust I sweep clean the floor. I clean the lights and windows of *tapasthan* and take away spider webs. In my prayer (*Ardas*) I give thanks to God for all. I just ask God “make me your shoes and keep me always with you. Whatever you wish let me do that. Keep me in your shelter.”

By attending to the Guru and the congregation as a subordinate servant the devotee will cultivate humility which has power to banish egoism and lead to spiritual progress.

Comprised in the notion of *gurseva* is the practice of presenting every religious work conducted inside or outside the gurdwara, and every material gift given to the gurdwara, as selfless offerings to the Guru. Various forms of the *seva* included in Sikh ceremonies, such as public distribution of food, material offerings of *prashad*, money, clothes and other objects, and even performances of devotional music, recitations, and propaganda speeches are to be understood as *gurseva* in the guise of oblation to the Guru-scripture and the *sangat*. The Sikhs perform the formal reading of the *Ardas* to impart which work has been completed or which object has been given. The performance of *Ardas* does not only function as a marker to frame social action as a unique event, but bestows action and material gifts a particular spiritual value by

being presented as offerings to the Guru. Through *Ardas* the Guru is informed on the acts conducted which thereby bestow sanctification. Material gifts that are offered by the *kirpan* and have been “accepted” and returned by the Guru, such as *karah prashad* and *langar*, are regarded as enhanced with even more value since the items have been intimately exchanged between devotees and the Guru.

The various types of *seva* can be perceived as devotional devices to seek divine favours through the mediating link of the Guru. According to a common saying, for every rupee one gives in offerings one will receive another rupee in return from the divine donor. To give donations and do services for others in the society from a true heart is to express thanks to God for what has been given and present requests for divine protection and welfare of family members in this life and the life hereafter. The belief that a powerful divine master and human servants are exchanging favours through the agency of the Guru becomes explicit in material offerings that make an integral part of ceremonies. For instance, when a family member falls ill it is customary to give money, food or medicine to the poor and needy, while reading prayers for the sake of the afflicted. The first time a newborn child is introduced to the gurdwara families often present large sums of money and sweets to the community for the child’s well-being. A death is similarly followed by a “death donation” from the mourning party, which consists of dry food (flour, rice, sugar, lentils, etc.), money, blankets, mattresses, kitchen utensils, clothes and other articles utilized in an ordinary human life. In the name of the deceased some of these items are given to the gurdwara for public use and others distributed among poor people. Special days of the solar and lunar calendar, such as full moon day (*puranmashi*) or the first day of the solar month (*sangrand*), are held to be particularly favourable for donations of money and food to the gurdwara. For whichever reason the offering of *seva* is done, it is held to be a good action that will grant religious merits and divine support to the donor. Individuals may take a pledge to perform *seva*, either as an advance promise if God will offer assistance or as an act of thanksgiving for favours already received. A middle-aged woman exemplified:

When people want something from God, they want their children to be healthy, then they say ‘if my wishes will be fulfilled [by God], then I will give *langar* to whole *sangat* in the Gurdwara’. When we ask something from God we are buttering God with *seva*. If we are true from the inside God will listen to us. God will do *seva* for us.

The commitment to do selfless service for the Guru, *sangat* or the society is therefore integrated in religious performances. In case an unbroken recitation of Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path*) is organized for a sick person, for instance, family members will promise to do *seva*, such as feeding poor children or arranging marriages for orphans, as return gifts if the sufferer gets relief. The underlying idea is that God’s kindness bestowed upon a person or a family should be reciprocated by means of *seva* to thank the divine giver and protector and avoid human vices in times of happiness.

For those who have been graced with wealth and health it is a moral obligation to seek the welfare of the society through the provision of a wide range of voluntary services to community members, social institutions, and people in need. Every year as the cold season arrived a Sikh businesswoman in Varanasi used to distribute a large number of blankets to homeless people sleeping on the ghats to “repay” the success of her own business and family. *Seva* conducted for the disprivileged in society – the poor, sick, handicapped and homeless – irrespective of religious, ethnic, and social belonging is given the highest religious value since these are acts of kindness to humanity which implement the Guru’s teaching. “The stomachs of poor people are the saving pot of the Guru. It should be an honour to serve poor people and you will gain the merit of 68 pilgrimages if you do this kindness,” a local *granthi* said. To distribute food free of charge and offer medical services, education, and lodging at a low cost are religious actions that have become institutionalized in the gurdwaras. Although the daily philanthropic work in a gurdwara is taken care of by *sevadars* and other employees, the *seva* is frequently singled out as the main attraction of a religious program that all people can participate in and benefit from. On festivals commemorating the Sikh martyrs the local communities may set up temporary blood donor camps in which volunteers can symbolically offer their blood, just as the martyrs sacrificed theirs in the greatest service. To celebrate anniversaries of the Sikhs Gurus the community may sponsor or organize mass vaccinations of children and surgeries for the handicapped.<sup>584</sup> For religious Sikhs the various expressions of *seva* are ways to serve God through the service to other people and work for a social uplifting of society in accordance with the Guru’s teaching inscribed in the Guru Granth Sahib.

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<sup>584</sup> The backwash of the tsunami in 2004 displayed the capacity of global Sikh charities to quickly mobilize relief workers and monetary aid in the name of *seva* (Myrvold 2005b).



## FOUR



### PRACTICES IN TIMES OF ORDER AND DISORDER DIFFERENT CONTEXTS OF WORSHIP ACTS

The previous chapter illustrated various worship acts by which Sikhs in Varanasi are reproducing and enacting *gurbani* texts and prayers. This chapter will describe a few ceremonies and situations in which these and other religious acts are enacted by the Sikhs. Following a common typology among ritual theorists the chapter is divided into three sections which successively exemplify Sikh rites of passage or life-cycle rites; calendrical rites or festivals; and finally rites of affliction and in times of need. The first two categories can be classified as “syntagmatic” ceremonies as they give order to the passage of time, either as organized events observed in connection with biological and sociocultural transitions in the human life or periodical events accompanying seasonal changes and the religious calendar. The last section, on the other hand, will exemplify practices that belong to the category of “pragmatic” ceremonies, that is, ceremonies which occur occasionally and primarily attempts to obtain supernatural assistance when human conditions are experienced to be disrupted.<sup>585</sup>

Unlike the collective and homogenized worship in the gurdwara, observances of festivals and life-cycle rites always vary by caste and by family traditions. Khatri families may follow customs which are alien to Jat families, even if both share a religious identity as Sikhs. There will always be local divergences in the performance of ceremonies as the Sikh community displays heterogeneity on many social divisions. Furthermore, rituals are always transmitted and enacted by people who adjust them to contemporary conditions and needs, and attribute them with their own meanings. The following descriptions will only exemplify how a limited number of Sikhs at Varanasi – the majority of merchant castes – may choose to respond to different situations in life and conduct standard performances. The primary aim is to give an ethnographic account and lay out the empirical foundation for a general theoretical discussion in the concluding chapter. Firstly, however, a brief note on the distinction between ritual and ceremony should be made.

Scholars sometimes use the two analytical terms “ritual” and “ceremony” synonymously when constructing typologies of ritual-like events and thereby mix up action with the contexts in which acts are performed. Classifications of particular rituals are frequently determined by the expected social functions of ritual acts, in

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<sup>585</sup> The distinction between syntagmatic and pragmatic ceremonies is derived from Marin 1987: 223. For different classification systems of rituals, consult Bell 1997: 93 – 94.

other words, by contextual elements and not what people actually do. To some extent this chapter follows a traditional classification system since the sections are divided into three genres or types of rites. Analytically I wish, however, to reserve the word “ritual” for separate acts which have become ritualized, while the term “ceremony” denotes a much broader event.<sup>586</sup> Ceremony, in my use and understanding of the word, is an analytic term which signifies a compound or structure of a set of ritualized and formalized acts, often in sequential and interdependent combinations. A ceremony like a “wedding” is thus not a single rite, but contains several acts clustered together within the framework of a larger happening. It also constitutes an immediate action context, from which people may derive meanings for their conducts. Writing on Quranic recitations in Egypt, Nelson (2001) has categorized five different public contexts for recitations: liturgical, rites of passage, ceremonial, media, and non-occasional.<sup>587</sup> Although Nelson is a musicologist and did not develop her notion of contexts theoretically, her general approach is interesting precisely because she treats different “types of rituals” as contexts in which recitations are attributed meanings in interaction between performers and the audience. The following descriptions of Sikh ceremonies should similarly be read as examples of how different types of ceremonial contexts can be shaped within a local community. In these contexts people enact various acts and negotiate meanings in relation to religious norms, the local culture, family customs, and changes in the broader society.

#### 4.1. SIKH RITES OF PASSAGE

In anthropological literature the term “life-cycle rites” or “rites of passage” refers to a genre of rituals that people perform at major events in life, like birth, puberty, marriage and death. These types of rites characteristically mark a person’s transition from one stage of social life to another and are sometimes tied to biological changes.<sup>588</sup> Arnold van Gennep’s oft-quoted interpretation of rites of passage presumed a three-staged ritual process during which a person leaves behind one social identity and then passes through a phase of no identity before admission into another. Van Gennep suggested that rites of passage had a function to generate symbolic stages which culturally redefine social status and identities of individuals.<sup>589</sup> Throughout history the authoritative traditions of the world religions have displayed a deep concern and interest in defining these rituals to mark religious boundaries and control practices. In the Sikh tradition the present code of conduct (*Sikh Rahit Maryada*) prescribes how Sikhs should conduct life-cycle rites in the time of birth, marriage, and death. The

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<sup>586</sup> As Humphrey & Laidlaw writes, ritual should be perceived “not as a kind of event or as an aspect of all action, but as a quality which action can come to have – a special way in which acts may be performed” (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 64).

<sup>587</sup> Nelson 2001: xxv.

<sup>588</sup> See e.g. Bell 1997: 94 ff.

<sup>589</sup> Van Gennep 1960.

following descriptive account on Sikh ceremonies at Varanasi will illustrate that local Sikhs observe normative and sanctioned life-cycle rites, but accompany these rituals with a cluster of other practices derived from the surrounding culture, Punjabi folk traditions, and family customs. To local Sikhs ceremonies and ritual acts surrounding childbirth, puberty, marriage, and death have individual names but are gathered under the collective Sanskrit term *samskara*, literally “purification”. The *samskaras* highlight important social transfers in life and often aim to refine the person from the inside and the outside to become a pure and truthful Sikh to the Guru. Characteristic of the *samskaras* is the use of *gurbani* texts, as recitations and singing, which together with community services and readings of the Sikh prayer constitute the essential religious elements that linger through the Sikh rites of passage.

### PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH

*“Vahiguru, Vahiguru, Vahiguru”...* Surender, a woman in her sixties, is resting on a bed while she is tenderly rocking her three-months-old grandson to sleep after food. To give the tiny infant temporary peace for an afternoon nap, she lets her voice repeatedly wash his face and body with the name of God – *Vahiguru*. She is breathing and blowing the words on him over and over again. The baby is virtually wrapped in her reciting until the yelling slowly fades out into a calm sleep.

Since ancient times the conception of a child, the different stages of a pregnancy, delivery, and the postnatal period have been marked with manifold religious and cultural customs among the castes and tribes in the Punjabi society. The present Sikh code of conduct briefly prescribes two ceremonies surrounding childbirth – a visit to the gurdwara after childbirth and the naming ceremony – and strongly condemns practices related to beliefs in birth pollution. Local Sikhs in Varanasi do observe the ceremonies stipulated in the normative manual, however, without excluding family and *gotra* customs which are continually modified to a modern way of living. As the descriptions below will illustrate, many of these practices related to childbirth serve to protect the vulnerable child from evil influences of humans and supernatural forces, shape the developing character and identity of the newborn in a positive manner, and incorporate the child into the community of a family and the collective of Sikhs by hearing and drinking hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib.

### CONCEPTION AND DELIVERY

A newly wedded couple is likely, and to a great extent expected, to receive a child within the first years of their marriage. For some parents the conception of a child will occur naturally and easily, for others a pregnancy will be long-awaited and the offspring vouchsafed only after persistent prenatal prayers and vows that address fertility. Barren couples may undertake pilgrimages to any of the numerous gurdwaras in the Punjab or temples dedicated to goddesses or folk deities which are renowned for bestowing children. Even if medical science has modified traditional

beliefs which held the woman guilty of infertility and the sex of the child, it is mostly women who engage in practices to secure the conception of a child, and particularly that of a son.

Sikhs in the urban setting of Varanasi may be well aware of public discourses on gender equality within the Sikh community and reject sex discrimination on religious grounds. But the birth of sons generates great enthusiasm and celebrations. The majority of Punjabi families maintain kinship conventions of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence customs, according to which the son will carry on the family line and is expected to take care of the parents when they grow old, while the daughter is incorporated into the household of the her husband and in-laws after marriage. In one conversation a Sikh woman in her twenties said: "When a son is born we think our generation is increased and therefore we wish for a son and celebrate the birth of a son. We are happy to receive a baby girl too but do not celebrate it in the same manner." Many ceremonies performed in connection with pregnancy and childbearing seek to determine the sex identity of the fetus and celebrate the birth of a male child. A childless woman may visit the local gurdwaras on a daily basis to pray before the Guru Granth Sahib for a male offspring. She may take a vow to visit a religious shrine, present offerings specified in type and amount, perform austerity practices or *seva* for a stipulated period, or promise to bring up her child as a religious Sikh, if God will bestow a child. When the parents in one family lost their first-born child due to cot death they consulted a reputed *sant* in the Punjab and made the promise that if they would get another child they would for five years dress it in clothes obtained from begging and not paid for by the family. According to the mother of the family the *sant* gave her consecrated food, from the power of which she was blessed with a pregnancy and gave birth to a daughter. The couple kept their promise and dressed the girl in clothes given by others until she reached the age of five. Other interlocutors told stories of how sons born into families from the spiritual power of shrines and saintly persons had been "donated" to religious places and traditions as a fulfillment of earlier vows. A baby born in response to human prayers will be considered a child of the Guru's court who took birth on a divine command and not by natural and karmic means. It is considered to be of crucial importance to keep the promise of votive gifts or practices to not put the health of the newborn child at a risk.

The various members of the Sikh community in Varanasi observe manifold customs in connection with pregnancy and childbirth which are singled out as social practices of their particular *gotra* or culture of origin and not necessarily related to their religious identity as Sikhs. Pregnancy in general is a time of vulnerability during which the expectant mother's diet and social activities are to be controlled and rituals are performed during different stages of the pregnancy to safeguard the fetus. Some local Sindhis, for instance, uphold what appears to be a modern version of the ancient Hindu and Muslim custom to celebrate *satvahin* or *satvansa*, the seventh month of a

pregnancy.<sup>590</sup> When a newly wed couple is expecting their first child, and the woman has reached the seventh month of pregnancy, the family – mostly female relatives – brings the couple to the gurdwara on the Sunday following new moon (*masia*) to supplicate for good health of the child. The ceremony contains some ritual acts that are typical for a Sikh setting, such as the reading of *Ardas* and the taking of *Hukam*. But within the sequence of the ceremony these worship acts are combined with elements drawn from Sindhi weddings in the gurdwara. When all participants have performed the standard *matha tekna* and the couple is seated in front of Guru Granth Sahib, the *granthi* offers a woolen shawl to the husband, who places one ending of the shawl over his shoulder and gives the other end to his wife. The woman's mother-in-law takes out one coconut and oil that are placed in the lap of the expectant woman. While all people gathered get up to a standing position, the *granthi* reads the Sikh *Ardas* and adds a few lines in which he wishes for the good health of the child. Afterward he takes a *Hukam* from Guru Granth Sahib. Being seated in front of the scripture, the mother-in-law and all female relatives will then smear the woman's head with oil. As in the wedding ceremony the husband will then lead the woman around Guru Granth Sahib in seven circumambulations without any break, whilst the woman holds the end of the shawl which is resting on her husband's shoulder and thus connects them. Again, when the circumambulation is completed, they bow to the scripture and sit down to receive flower-garlands from the *granthi*. At the same time *sevadars* are distributing *prashad*, the family brings forward offerings – such as food, money and a coconut – and present a new *rumala* to Guru Granth Sahib by placing it on the scriptural volume. As I was told, the ceremony is related to worship of the moon (*chand*) during the first year of marriage and aims to procure blessing from the Sikh Guru to protect the fetus from malevolent forces.

Ceremonies singled out as typical Sikh practices, on the other hand, exclusively involve recitations of particular verses from the Guru Granth Sahib. In *Sankat Mochan Shabad*, the popular collections of *gurbani* hymns to recite in different situations of need, childbearing, and especially the reception of a son, is a recurrent theme. One version of the *Sankat Mochan Shabad* prescribes that a woman should recite a scriptural verse 108 times for 41 days before pregnancy to conceive a son with good fortune. Another *gurbani* hymn in the same anthology is to be recited during the first month of pregnancy to protect the fetus until delivery and the recitation will bless the child with intelligence and a long life. To protect from miscarriage after the second month and develop a male fetus the expectant mother should recite yet another verse for 41 days.<sup>591</sup> The various editions of *Sankat Mochan Shabad* also provide ritual instructions on how to recite separate verses to give birth to a child with good luck and

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<sup>590</sup> For descriptions of earlier practices of *satvahn* and *satvansa* in various districts of the Punjab, consult Rose 1999 (1919).

<sup>591</sup> *Sankat Mochan* compiled by Giani Narain Singh.

protect a newborn from bad spirits during the subsequent forty day period of confinement.<sup>592</sup>

Sikh women in Varanasi particularly suggested one hymn composed by Guru Arjan (on page 396 in *Guru Granth Sahib*) for readings in times of pregnancy and when the mother wishes for a healthy son. In this hymn the fifth Guru ornately develops the metaphor of a child's birth and the affectionate relationship between a father and son:

The True Satguru has sent the child. The long-lived child has been born by destiny. When he came and acquired an abode in the womb, his mother's heart became very glad. The son, the saint of the world – Lord is born. The primal writ has become manifest amongst all. Pause. In the tenth month, by Lord's command, the baby has been born. Sorrow has left and great joy has become manifest. The mates sing the Guru's hymns in glee. This is pleasing to the True Lord's heart. The vine has extended and shall last for many generations. The Lord has firmly established the machinery of devotion and love. The Satguru has granted me, what my mind wished for. I have become carefree and have fixed my attention on one God. As a child takes great pride on its father, so do I speak as it pleases the Guru to have me speak. It is not a concealed and hidden matter. Guru Nanak, being mightily pleased has given me this gift.<sup>593</sup>

A middle-aged Sikh woman said the expectant mother should begin reciting this composition from the first month of pregnancy and continue to repeat it 108 times daily for a total period of 40 days, in order to determine the sex of the fetus. Furthermore, the becoming mother should perform the recitation in the morning on an empty stomach and while seated on the floor with a pot filled with water beside her. Each morning when the reading is completed, she should drink the water, which has turned into *amrit* by the recited words.

These very tangible directives for recitations of a single hymn may also illustrate how text recitations become attributed with illocutionary and perlocutionary forces (See Chapter 5) when the sacred utterances of the Gurus are transferred to performance contexts. As a ritualized speech act, recitations of *gurbani* hymns are frequently attributed various bodily, moral, and spiritual effects on the reader which relate to the semantic content of the text recited. In other words, metaphors and

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<sup>592</sup> *Sankat Mochan* compiled by Gurcharan Singh.

<sup>593</sup> GGS: 396. The same composition makes hymn number 37 in Gurcharan Singh's edition of *Sankat Mochan* and is to be recited to acquire a son with good luck. In the written life-story of Baba Vadbhag Singh (see below in this chapter) the same hymn is quoted under the heading "The hymn to get sons". Pregnant women are instructed to read the hymn 101 times daily and drink the water-nectar of each recitation from the second month of pregnancy up to delivery (*Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi*, p. 83).

themes of a written *gurbani* hymn determine the expected results from reciting the verse. When choosing a *gurbani* hymn for a particular purpose or reason, the selection is based on a semantic relationship between the language within the text and the desired result from a recitation of the text. When a Sikh woman wishes for a child she will therefore select a scriptural hymn which has prepositional meanings that draws upon a theme which corresponds to her personal wish. As she is reciting the composition, she is not merely reproducing sounds or the semantic content of the text, but quotes the text with prior intentions of achieving something from her performance. In this case the illucutionary force of her recitation is to gain supernatural assistance to receive a healthy son. In the moment of reciting, she is also attributing a perlouctionary effect to the recitation act, as she believes that her own performance will actually produce a real effect, that is, to protect the fetus in her womb and even determine its sexual identity. Recitations of *gurbani* hymns are not considered merely symbolic action nor disconnected from the semantic content of the text, but are believed to produce real bodily and moral effects on the mother and fetus.

Delivery is similarly marked with text recitations but involves different actors. In former days many castes and clans would send the pregnant daughter-in-law to her parents' house for delivery of the first-born child. The delivery work was completed with the help of traditional mid-wives and surrounded by customs to secure a lucky birth. Today the majority of Sikhs choose to have deliveries in hospitals and many of the traditional customs earlier adjusted to a rural living are deemed irrelevant to the modern and urban life-style. Since the pregnant woman is entering a critical physical stage and the husband and other male relatives are generally excluded from delivery wards it is the men of the household who will answer for religious worship that aims to protect the mother and the child.

A Sikh man in his thirties explained that when the labor pains began he read an *Ardas* at the house before taking his wife to the hospital. On the way he continuously did *simran* and recited the name of God (*Vahiguru*) for divine protection and to relieve the pains of his wife. After she had been registered at the hospital and was transferred to the delivery ward the man sat in the waiting room and for hours recited Guru Gobind Singh's composition *Chaupai Sahib*. "Everything passed well by that," he concluded. Recitation of *Chaupai Sahib* is by many Sikhs believed to provide protection and eliminate anxieties. In case the labor entails complications both men and women of the household will gather to do *puja path* of the composition at the house.

Provided that delivery goes well and the mother and the child are healthy, the first a newborn baby should get in touch with is the name of God (*Vahiguru*) and *gurbani*. It is customary to whisper *Vahiguru*, recite the initial "root mantra" of Guru Granth Sahib (*mulmantra*), or read the whole composition of *Japji Sahib* in the ears of the infant. As one interlocutor said, uttering *Vahiguru* should be seen as thanks to God for having a child born in a Sikh family and a supplication for the future spiritual development of the child. If God's name is the first word an infant gets to hear, he or she will more likely dedicate the adult life to remembrance and contemplation

on God. Some families may choose to cover the newborn baby in old cloths that have been used as scriptural robes in the gurdwara and thus are believed to store blessings of the Guru.

When the family receives information about the newborn child a family member or relative, often a male, will visit the gurdwara to perform an *Ardas* in thanksgiving of the newborn child and give donations, sometimes of considerable value, to the gurdwara. To celebrate the occasion the family organizes unbroken recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib and distributes large quantities of sweets to friends, relatives, and the Sikh congregation. Having a baby is a happy occasion which brings a sweet flavor and atmosphere to the family life, and all should consequently be invited to share the joy.

As infants are held to be susceptible to malevolent forces, such as spirits, ghosts, sorcery, and the evil eye, families usually decorate their children with small sized steel bracelets (*kara*) to ward off evil spirits. Iron is popularly believed to protect from evil spirits. In this case one of five symbols which Sikh neophytes should wear on the right hand after the Khalsa ceremony has been attributed similar power and is given to children from infancy. The families I spoke with would either decorate the child with a bracelet on the first day after delivery or invite the *granthi* from the gurdwara to dress the baby with the first Sikh symbol after a week or more. The small ceremony of giving the bracelet was by some of Khatri families referred to as *chola pana*, the reception of the baby's first ceremonial garment, which implied the recognition of the child's religious identity.<sup>594</sup> Whether individuals brought up in Sikh families decide to adopt an *Amritdhari* identity or not, most will wear the bracelet to mark out their affiliation to the Sikh religion. Many Sikhs perceive the bracelet as sign of a human-divine relationship and an amulet which stores spiritual powers. The *kara* is often placed under the mother's pillow to give her protection and strength. Dressing a newborn baby with a bracelet is conducted for similar reasons. Many of my informants claimed that wearing other amulets, such as the popular Muslim capsule containing Koranic verses (*taviz*) and the black thread (*tarang*) tied around the waist of a child, or to apply black kajal (*surma*) around the eyes of the infant, are practices contravening the Sikh code of conduct, but they would still adorn their children with these objects to shield harmful effects evoked by humans and spirits.

#### POSTNATAL OBSERVANCES

Like many other Asian cultures, the postnatal period following a birth of a Sikh baby is ritually and socially marked by seclusion of both the mother and the child, followed by ceremonies of purification and feeding that gradually incorporate them into the ordinary social life of the family and the larger community. After giving birth to a child the woman is by tradition generally believed to be temporarily impure (*apavitra*, *ashuddh*) and will be held in seclusion for a total period of forty days after deliv-

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<sup>594</sup> Among Aroras and Khatri the term *chola* earlier signified the ceremonial first clothing of a child and would occur on the thirteenth day after birth (Rose 1999 (1919): 754).



ery, unless she falls ill or for some reasons needs or wants to get back earlier to work or household duties.<sup>595</sup> The period of confinement is commonly called *chilla*, which literally means “the fortieth” or “period of forty days”, even if the modern life-style allows women to shorten it to three, two, and sometimes only one week. In any case the period of *chilla*, whether it comprises forty days or less, implies that woman should not enter the cooking area of the house, not touch kitchen utensils or prepare food for others, and is encouraged to remain at home before she has undergone purification rites. She is to control social relations and the intake of food to protect both herself and the child who are sensitive to diseases and malevolent influences.

As the woman is bodily weak and considered impure during the period of confinement, relatives will feed her the first weeks, preferably with food that is believed to have a “hot” effect (*panjiri*) on organs of the body, such as lentils, onions, garlic, egg-plant, and eggs. “Hot” food is believed to restore the woman’s loss of blood during labor and provide her more energy for breast-feeding. Within the household the family will also keep separate utensils for the women in order to shield other family members from pollutions.<sup>596</sup> A few Sikhs of Khatri and Baniya origin said they observed *chhati* – a ceremony which originally, as the name implies, was celebrated on the sixth day after delivery.<sup>597</sup> On this day the mother and the child are bathed and dressed in new clothes from the maternal grandmother’s house. The family invites relatives to the house to see and celebrate the baby and serve the guests sweeten food.

During the forty-day period the mother will take several baths (*ishnana*), which should occur on the more auspicious odd numbered dates. Depending upon her state of health and family traditions, the first bath, which is always in hot water and includes a hair wash, is carried out either on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or the 13<sup>th</sup> day after delivery. Subsequently the woman will have three to four additional baths before the period of seclusion is ended: the second bath commonly occurs on the 11<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> day and the third on the 21<sup>st</sup>. When *chilla* culminates on the fortieth day the mother should take one more cleansing bath and undergo a ritualized purification which will conclude the period of impurity and re-incorporate her into the social life. On that day the family will invite the *granthi* to the house (and sometimes the group of five men representing the *panj pyare* or any other *Amritdhari* Sikhs) to distribute *kirpanvala amrit*, that is, the nectar water stirred with the dagger and over which the first five verses of *Japji Sahib* have been recited. The *granthi* prepares the *amrit* in the gurdwara before a visit to the family house and keeps the sweetened water in a covered steel box to

<sup>595</sup> In former days the extent of the seclusion and ritual observances after child birth were related to local caste traditions and the sex of the child. In Rawalpindi, for instance, the mother was tended to for a total period of forty days in cases where she had given birth to a son, but if the child was a girl only for twenty-one days (Rose 1999(1919): 748). Among urban Sikhs in Varanasi today most women seem to be given freedom to freely choose whether they want to fulfill a total period of forty days or return back to work or household duties when they feel recovered.

<sup>596</sup> Some families follow a custom of giving the mother a thin gruel (*daliya*) up to the 11<sup>th</sup> day after delivery and on the same day invite family and friends to receive gifts as a good omen.

<sup>597</sup> See Rose 1999 (1919): 751, 770.

bring with him. Seated beside the mother the *granthi* fills his cupped right hand with nectar-water and let it drop five times into the mouth of the child. Then he applies the *amrit* to the baby's head and eyes, five times each. He pours another palmful of water in the hands of the mother, who will drink it five times, and then purifies her eyes and head in a similar way. At the end of the ceremony the *granthi* will take off his shoes and together with the woman, child, and female relatives present the Sikh supplication. If any nectar-water remains he may distribute it as consecrated food (*prashad*) to all participants. A local *granthi*, frequently invited for this ceremony, said that most families want to receive the nectar-water on the fortieth day after delivery, but it may just as well be distributed earlier if the mother is alone in the household and desires to go back to ordinary life earlier. As women in the urban setting deliver at the hospital rather than at the house, some want to receive the purifying nectar before they are discharged and return home after a week. The *granthi* is therefore distributing the *amrit* both in hospitals and homes.

The purification of the mother is commonly referred to as *chaunke charna*, meaning "entering the kitchen" and thus ritually marks the end of the period of impurity and the woman's return to social life. Only after she has drank and been sprinkled with the nectar-water of *Japji Sahib* may she take up household duties and freely interact with people inside and outside the house. But the practice was also harshly criticized by a few reformist voices in Varanasi. That a mother needs rest and time for physical recovery justifies the customary postnatal seclusion for forty days, but to believe that the female body contracts pollution after delivery and has to undergo purification they considered contradictory to the Guru's teaching.<sup>598</sup> In the case of a younger *Amritdhari* couple, for instance, the husband was of the strong opinion that birth pollution was a foolish and superstitious belief. When his wife gave birth to their first son he consequently forbade her to take the purifying *amrit*. The young woman became very indignant with his decision and together with the mother-in-law ganged up against him: for five hours on end they cried until the husband finally gave in and let her take the nectar on the 13<sup>th</sup> day after delivery. Very few women would in fact consider entering the kitchen area unless they have undergone the purification rite, whether this position is motivated by personal beliefs about impurity, pressure from family members, or is a means to have their new social status recognized in the society. Despite the male dominance and preference of sons over daughters the ceremony of *chaunke charna* brings about a new status of the woman as a mother who has given birth to a child and thereby contributed to the prosperity of the family. Both the period of seclusion during *chilla* (even if shortened to a couple of weeks) and the ceremony of *chaunke charna* is commonly considered a prerequisite for celebrations of future auspicious events in the family.

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<sup>598</sup> A Sikh man in his thirties said: "They say that a woman who gives birth to a baby becomes impure (*apvitar*). How can she become impure? The Brahmins, the pandits, created these beliefs. Men never get impure. Women who give birth get impure. I do not believe in this. Only foolish people think like this."

It is noteworthy that the *amrit* given to the mother after the forty day period is normally described as purification from birth pollution, while the nectar-water given to her baby on the same occasion evokes the distinct framework of incorporation into a socio-religious identity and community.<sup>599</sup> An elderly Sikh woman commented: "It is like a blessing. The baby will have a long life, go on the right path and read *gurbani*. It [the water-nectar] gives the form of a Sikh." By imbibing verses of the hymn *Japji Sahib* materialized in water the child will develop a religious disposition to eventually become a true Sikh of the Guru. The substance is believed to carry divine protection, blessings, and powers to transform the bio-moral character of the baby. By drinking the *amrit* the newborn son or daughter is admitted to the community and will be publicly displayed. This ritualized technique to prepare the child for a life as a Sikh will, as we shall see, be repeated one year after birth.

The end of a *chilla*, normally on the fortieth or the forty-first day after birth, usually marks a day of festivities when the family brings the mother and child to the gurdwara to do *matha tekna* before the Guru Granth Sahib, present food offerings and let the *granthi* perform a prayer in which he gives thanks for the baby. In return the family may receive a guiding *Hukam*. In case the newborn baby is a longed-for son, wealthier family may arrange a procession with brass bands and organize an *Akhand path* of the Sikh scripture. Later on the family may throw a party with recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib* and musical programs at the house and invite relatives and friends to see the child. Food and sweets in particular are generously distributed, even to the baby, as it is popularly held that a child who gets to taste sweets in early infancy will develop a sweet and good character. Some families may invite male or female relatives or friends regarded to have an especially good nature to feed the new born with honey, believing that the good and moral qualities of the giver will be transferred to the child.

## CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

During the first years of a child's life the individual family will adopt several social and religious customs intended to secure the good health of the child and avert evil effects. If the child displays symptoms of diseases or any other disorder Sikh parents will commit themselves to recitations of particular *gurbani* hymns which are believed to protect the child from bodily and spiritual afflictions. A middle-aged *Amritdhari* woman told how she had been reciting a particular hymn of Guru Granth Sahib until she almost lost consciousness when her four-months-old daughter fell seriously ill: "I was very sad and cried. I recited the *shabad* (*gurbani* hymn) continually until I lost my senses."<sup>600</sup> The birth of a child is also an event which concerns the whole kinship

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<sup>599</sup> According to the eighteenth century *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* nectar should be given to a newborn son (McLeod 1987: 38).

<sup>600</sup> The hymn she used is Guru Arjan's popular composition in *Rag Bilawal* on page 819 in Guru Granth Sahib.

group and the larger community of friends and relatives. The child is to be properly welcomed with elaborate communal ceremonies at which the child assumes a social identity and role in the world. At the spring-festival *Lohri* in January, for instance, Punjabi couples will invite relatives from far and wide to celebrate their first-born child, especially if it is a son, by setting up a bonfire and singing folk-songs. In childhood and adolescence there are religious ceremonies which are loosely linked to biological changes of the child and aim at incorporating the child into the sociocultural order and shape his or her future identity. In Varanasi my interlocutors paid attention to three principal ceremonies of this kind which involve the giving of a name, a comb for the first hair, and – for boys – the turban.

#### COMBING AT VAISAKHI

When the child's hair grows out and needs to be combed for the first time, Sikh families observe a ceremony commonly referred to as "the comb ceremony" (*Kangha samskar*) or "fixing the comb" (*kangha lagana*) in the hair. The mother will bring her child to the gurdwara to let the *granthi* distribute a sweet nectar-water. After this purification the *granthi* will decorate the baby's hair with the small comb (*kangha*) which is one of five religious symbols that *Amritdhari* Sikhs wear in the top-knot. In a somewhat asymmetrical way *Kangha samskar* resembles the traditional tonsure ceremonies among Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab. The first hair of the child was believed to hold powers and was sometimes carried as amulets to avert evil influences.<sup>601</sup> Instead of shaving the first hair of the child, the Sikhs decorate it with a comb to keep the unshorn hair with dignity.

Most of the families I interviewed had observed this ceremony on the first *Vaisakhi*, the day celebrating the creation of Khalsa in 1699, following childbirth when the baby was between one and two years old.<sup>602</sup> Some said the mother had to eat a vegetarian diet and was not allowed to comb the child's hair before this ceremony. The choice of *Vaisakhi* for the *Kangha samskar* suggests that the ceremony is an early preparation of the child for a possible later adoption of an *Amritdhari* identity. My interlocutors emphasized that the ceremony should not be confused with the Khalsa ceremony as the child and mother are distributed *kirpanvala amrit* during *Kangha samskar* and not the nectar prepared by the double-edged sword. As a *granthi* said "this *amrit* is to purify and prepares the child to become a Sikh. After this *amrit* comes the *khandevala amrit*."

Like the ritual purification of the mother and child after delivery, the *granthi* will make the nectar by reciting the five first verses of *Japji Sahib* over sweetened water and stirring it with his dagger. He will gather all the mothers, holding their children, inside the gurdwara beside the scriptural throne and ask them to lay down the children on the floor. Five times he pours *amrit* into the mouth of the each child

<sup>601</sup> Rose 1999 (1919): 781.

<sup>602</sup> One female interlocutor said her family celebrated this ceremony during the autumn festival *Dassehra*.

while uttering the name of God (*Vahiguru*) and five times he splashes nectar-water on their foreheads. A palm of consecrated water is also be given to the mothers for ingestion. The *granthi* will then place small combs before the Guru Granth Sahib and read the *Ardas*. By this act the combs are sanctified and he will thereafter fasten a comb in the hair of each child, one by one. The individual family may choose to celebrate *Kangha samskar* in a festive manner by arranging an *Akhand path* of Guru Granth Sahib and invite relatives and friends for food at the house.

#### RECEIVING A NAME

One of the first ceremonies which aim to provide the newborn Sikh child a personal identity within the social group is *Nam karan*, or the name-giving ceremony. Immediately after birth the parents normally give the baby a nickname in Punjabi or English that describes the physical or behavioral characteristic of the child (e.g., Raja ("King"), Mittu ("Sweetie"), Pretty, Goldy, Shorty, etc.), or signifies natural objects or animals (e.g., Billa or "cat" if the eyes of the baby have unusual colors).<sup>603</sup> The parents may sometimes choose a rather nasty nick name in order to protect their child from diseases and bad luck. The nickname will follow the individual for the rest of their life and is the name by which he or she is addressed among relatives and friends. Later on both male and female babies will be given formal Sikh names to be used in public and which normally consist of two or three parts: a formal first name and middle name, the later of which is the suffix of "Singh" (lion) for men and "Kaur" (princess) for women. Families may also add a surname which indicates the *gotra* or sub-caste of the individual or the village or town from which the family hails from. It is the first name that will be given in the name-giving ceremony conducted in the gurdwara.

At what age the child is given a formal name differs between Sikh families. In Varanasi most of my interlocutors were of the opinion that the name-giving ceremony was to be commenced in connection with the child's first visit to the gurdwara, as the normative Sikh code of conduct prescribes. Other families would wait one to five years with the ceremony and some had postponed it until the child had reached early puberty. The stated reasons for these irregularities depend on practical and religious factors. It is usually when the child is to be registered in school and has to sign up for board examinations that a formal first name and surname is required. Consequently the family will arrange the naming ceremony when there is a need to assume a full name of their child. Many parents will give the son or daughter a Sikh name at a particular time and place, or at a certain age or stage in life, as the fulfillment of a promise they made before the birth of the child. A Sikh woman in Varanasi told how she went by a nickname up to adult age and got her Sikh name only after marriage, since her mother had made this a prenatal promise if she would be blessed with a healthy child. A common practice is to make a promise to give child a name at a famous Sikh pilgrimage center, such as Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar, Patna Sahib in Bihar, Hazoor Sahib in Nander, or Hemkunt Sahib in the Himalayan hills. The

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<sup>603</sup> Kang 1988: 155 – 156, Paramjit Singh 2002: 86 – 87.

parents will thus wait until the child is old enough to go on a pilgrimage. Some parents had chosen to celebrate the name-giving ceremony either in connection with the child's birthday or during a Sikh festival like Guru Nanak's birthday or *Vaisakhi*. As they presented the child before the Guru Granth Sahib and took help of the Guru to get a name which their child would need and be identified with in the society, sacred places and times associated with the Sikh Gurus were considered auspicious for the occasion. To invoke divine blessings they would arrange an unbroken recitation of the Sikh scripture and adjust the favorable ending to the day of the name-giving ceremony.

According to the stipulated procedure of *Nam karan* ceremony today, the *granthi* seats himself behind the scriptural throne and opens the Guru Granth Sahib at random to take a *Hukam*. The first letter of the first word of the *Hukam* is the letter by which the child's name will be formed. For instance, if the first word begins with the letter "h" then the child can be given the name Hardeep, Harpreet, Harmeet, or any other Sikh names that begin with the letter "h". Ideally the *granthi* will propose a suitable name to be publicly announced, but the parents may just as well pick a name by themselves and consult the family or the congregation.<sup>604</sup> The name selected should be a conventional Sikh name which carries religious signification. Proper names which start with the letter "h" would thus be Hardeep ("light of God"), Harpreet ("love of God"), Harmeet ("friend of God"), and so on. Most of the Sikh names are unisex in the sense that the same name may be selected for both a male and female child. When the name has been announced in the gurdwara the congregation approves the selection by crying out the Sikh *jaikara* (*Jo bole So Nihal – Sat Sri Akal*). After this, six stanzas of the hymn *Anand Sahib* are sung and the *granthi* will perform an *Ardas* in which he invokes blessings for the child and presents the naming ceremony as an offering to the Guru. *Karah prashad* is served to the congregation and the family may distribute additional food either in the gurdwara or at the house to celebrate the event.

#### TYING THE TURBAN

The wearing of the Sikh turban –*dastar* or *pagri* – is regarded mandatory for all male *Amritdhari* and *Keshdhari* Sikhs. The Sikh code of conduct makes the wearing of turbans optional for women, although a few sectarian groups within the Sikh community, such as followers of Akhand Kirtani Jatha and the American Sikh Dharma movement, have come to regard it compulsory for both sexes. The meanings and significations of wearing a turban are multiple as Sikhs in the modern world have to justify the custom to authorities and the civil society in different cultures.<sup>605</sup> Even if the turban is not one of five symbols *Amritdhari* Sikhs should wear it has gained a strong symbolic value for a religious and ethnic Sikh identity that is unquestionable. Those who are well-acquainted with the turban culture of the Punjab can easily

<sup>604</sup> For the customs of picking names for Sikh babies, see Sodhi 1984.

<sup>605</sup> For symbolic interpretations of the *dastar*, see articles in Mohinder Singh 2000.

identify the bearer's geographical origin, social status, political affiliation, or belonging to sectarian groups by the method of tying the turban and the choice of colour and size. To take off the turban may just as well be interpreted as a denial of one's Sikh and Punjabi identity. Interpretations of what the turban represents as a symbol are however situational and continually changing between different contexts. At conflicts or whenever the urgent need arises to define religious or ethnic borders and mark out a separate identity the turban is presented either as a religious or cultural symbol depending on the discourse and situation at hand. On an individual level the turban is the satisfactory means to cover the uncut hair with dignity and honor, and it is considered a grave offence to touch or remove it by force. Traditionally the turban has been associ-



ated with male power and authority in the Punjabi culture. After the death of a father the eldest son was given a turban to represent his responsibilities and transfer of status to the succession of paternal authority. On the occasions of marriage the fathers and close relatives of the bride and groom would exchange turbans to express their new relationship and brotherhood. Another custom that is still maintained by considerably many contemporary Sikh families is *Dastar bandhi*, the turban-tying ceremony when the boy is solemnly decorated with his first turban.<sup>606</sup>

While Sikh boys are still too young to wear a turban they bind their unshorn and long hair in a top-knot which is covered by a small piece of cloth (*rumal*) or a longer cloth (*patka*) that is tied over the head to cover all the hair. It is when the boy reaches puberty that he is considered mature and ready to wear the turban with honor, usually when he is between the age of eleven and sixteen. The family will then arrange *Dastar bandhi* at the house or the gurdwara and invite relatives to be generously fed and rejoice the boy's transition from childhood to manhood. Most of my interlocutors in Varanasi said the ceremony was optional and highly dependant on the family's financial status. The family is expected to arrange an *Akhand path* of Guru Granth Sahib and adjust the favorable conclusion to the day of festivity. The turban is given from the house of the maternal grandparents, while it is the job of the *granthi* to tie it on the boy's head in the presence of the scripture and all the guests. After the

<sup>606</sup> In colloquial speech the ceremony is also referred to as *dastar sajana*, the "decoration" of the *dastar*.

*Dastar bandhi* the boy is treated as a young man and may wear turban in public spaces.

In a *Dastar bandhi* ceremony I was invited to the family had installed the Guru Granth Sahib in the living room at their house and invited a *ragi jatha* from the gurdwara to perform devotional music to the fifty guests summoned. The young boy about to receive his first turban was dressed in traditional *pyjama kurta* in silk and wore a *keski*, the small under-turban. After the musical performance the *granthi* lead the assembly in a standardized reading of *Ardas* and afterwards took a seat behind the Guru Granth Sahib to take a *Hukam* for the occasion. The boy was requested to seat himself before the scripture, surrounded by relatives, while the *granthi* arranged the five-meter long maroon coloured cloth. With solemnized movements the *granthi* wrapped the cloths around the boy's head. When the tying procedure was completed, he smartened up the turban and then exhorted all participants to cry out the Sikh *jaikara*, which also marked the end of the religious part of the ceremony. The boy was swamped with congratulations, gifts, and flattering comments from relatives and friends, and proudly posed for photographers in his new garb. Large quantities of food and sweets were served at the house that evening.

#### DONATING THE GIFT OF HAIR

Human hair has undoubtedly played a vital symbolic role in various religious traditions in India and beyond. Prophets, saints and other spiritually gifted people are often depicted as long-haired, sometimes with their spiritual powers intimately associated with the hair. To understand the meanings and functions of unshorn hair in various cultures anthropologists have sometimes resorted to psychological models of interpretation to prove that human hair is associated with social control and sexuality. According to Leach, a hair cut or shaving is the collective symbol for the social transition of an individual from one stage to another. The bodily hair is an expression of a strong human power and by a ceremonial mutilation of this power chaos is prevented.<sup>607</sup> Treading in similar footsteps, Hallpike suggests that the social function of long hair is to demarcate the lack of social control and a marginal or "liminal" belonging, whereas the ritual hair-cutting or shaving adds social control and signifies incorporation into the society.<sup>608</sup> Considering that unshorn hair is one of five symbols that *Amritdhari* should wear, Sikh scholars and apologetics have produced a bulk of literature to explain the meanings and significations of these symbols. The Sikh *rahit-nama* literature, or manuals of the codes of conduct that evolved from the beginning of the eighteenth century, prescribes that the unshorn hair (*kesh*) of the Sikhs should be kept with great respect. The *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* from the early eighteenth century, for instance, takes great pains in giving practical instructions on how the Sikh hair should be taken care of lest it be exposed to disgrace. The author of this text briefs us

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<sup>607</sup> Leach 1958.

<sup>608</sup> Hallpike 1979.



as to how to wash, dry and comb the Sikh hair and how to keep it with dignity in different situations of social life.<sup>609</sup>

Modern Sikh intellectuals frequently rationalize the normative precept of unshorn hair from scientific interpretations to prove that disruption by cutting human hair, contrary to the anthropological hypothesis, is a denial of the natural condition of humans as powerful social beings preordained by a divine order. Comparisons are often made to the ritual shavings at different life stages in Hindu Brahminism, as well as the traditional initiation rites in heterodox ascetic orders in the Hindu traditions.<sup>610</sup> In his structural analysis Uberoi (1996) suggests that the Sikh hair, the comb and the turban stand in a symbolic relationship to affirm the assertion of social life and humans as social beings under moral control. Unlike the shaven or matted hair of ascetics the unshorn hair of the Sikhs symbolizes the approval of socially active citizenship in a civil society. While the comb keeps the hair tidy and constrains it, the turban encloses both the hair and the comb, and thus functions as a moral constraint of the strong social forces in humans. As Uberoi summarizes, the Sikh symbols create a symbolic inversion of Hindu customs to affirm that in the Sikh tradition spiritual emancipation does not go through renunciation of social life but to live and act in the social world.<sup>611</sup>

Symbolic analyses like these are certainly interesting, even if they often fail to provide realistic information about what people actually say about symbols. Interpretations in the lived reality remain relative and vary depending upon the perspectives of the person who is being asked. Some of my interlocutors in Varanasi correlated the head hair with interior feelings of faith and loyalty to the Guru's teaching or perceived it as an extension of internal powers in the human soul and mind, while others were content to see it as an identity marker they maintained because the Guru had commanded them to do so. A well-kept *kesh* is the seal of the Guru's disciple and many consider it to be a natural gift of God to be preserved and protected. "The hair which you are given by God at birth is natural so we do not have any right to cut it. We are bound to have it and not let the scissors touch it," a Sikh woman said. Religiously motivated bearers of the *kesh* may decline surgery, even in potentially lethal situations, in case the treatment involves hair removal. In the daily *Ardas* the Sikhs

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<sup>609</sup> McLeod 1987: 33 – 34.

<sup>610</sup> In Brahmanic traditions the head hair of a boy is shaved in early childhood as an offering to the Gods and when the boy reaches adolescence his first beard will be ritually shaved to mark his sexually awakening and transition to adult life. In ascetic orders, on the other hand, the ritual means to mark the neophyte's renunciation of a householder life and his social and sexual death is to either shave off his hair at initiation or ignore the physical appearance by keeping unkempt matted hair.

<sup>611</sup> Uberoi 1996: 11 – 13. Unfortunately Uberoi excludes Sikh women in his analysis of Sikh symbols. His hypothesis would in fact have gained from their inclusion. Although only a few Sikh women wear turbans, the large majority considered it proper to enclose the hair in braids or a knot covered with a shawl. Stigmatized women with dangerous powers, including those under influences of supernatural beings, are often depicted with their hair untied and uncontrolled.

thank God for their hair as a divine gift (*kesh dan*). When the hairs come loose from daily combings and natural loss or the individual chooses to have the hair cut, the gift should consequently be returned to a divine recipient. Sikh men and women will collect and save their old and fallen hairs in special bags, sometimes for several years, before disposing it in a cremation ceremony or by immersion into river Ganga or some watercourse. A few said they used to bring their old hair whenever they were going on a pilgrimage to dispose of it at some sacred spot in the Punjab or elsewhere.



Collecting lost hair from combing for immersion in the river Ganga

During my fieldwork in Varanasi Bhupinder, a key informant and a good friend of mine, offered to demonstrate the customary practice of consigning hair to river Ganga. One day we rented a boat that took us to the middle of the rapid-flowing river. We removed our sandals and took a standing position in the boat, while keeping the palms of the hands together. Bhupinder began to recite the *Ardas* text and at the end of the prayer he added two sentences which read: "I am going to immerse my hair in river Ganga. If I have made any mistake, please forgive me." Subsequently he took out the dry hairballs from a plastic bag and slowly submerged them into the river. In Bhupinder's own words, he conducted the ceremony because Guru Gobind Singh had commanded his Sikhs to avoid "insult" of the Sikh hair. As we were standing in the boat, he also added that it was an offering (*parvan*) of his *kesh* to mother Ganga. During a meeting in the gurdwara a few days later a Sikh propagandist, temporarily visiting Varanasi from the Punjab, leveled criticism on the ceremony Bhupinder had carried out, claiming that it was not complying with the normative

code of conduct. As he said, all hairs which come loose from combing should be collected and burnt to ashes and not immersed in any river held sacred by Hindus. The present *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, however, does not specify the ritual procedure of hair disposal. The local discussion came to stand as an illustrative case in point of how conflicting interpretations on proper conducts co-exist and are continually negotiated in the lived religion. But even if Sikhs in this case displayed different opinions regarding ceremonial procedures they still maintained that old hairs from combing should be given as a return gift to God, whether this is accomplished through a consignment to the water or the fire.

## MARRIAGE

Perhaps the most celebrated ceremony in the Sikh social and cultural life is the wedding. In Sikhism marriage (*viah*) is considered the basis of family and social life. Marriage completes humans by fringing them into the formal status of a householder which is also the ideal state for human's spiritual quests. With the rural life forming the backdrop, the Punjabi folklore – poetry, songs and art – often capture cultural sentiments of marriage. The image of the young woman preparing her own dowry at the spinning wheel is well-known to Punjabis, even if nostalgic themes like these do not necessarily correspond to the contemporary social reality. Over the years marriage practices in the Sikh community and the Punjab have been a privileged subject among scholars. A monitoring of these studies display that the scholarly focus has been directed at sociological aspects of marriage, such as family and kinship systems, dowry, and changing generational attitudes towards marriage customs.<sup>612</sup>

Globally the Sikh community today shares a standard wedding ceremony (*Anand karaj*) which contracts a marriage. Surrounding this ceremony, however, lies a whole labyrinth of customs and rites that do not stipulate a marriage but functions as a cultural and social overlay to the wedding rite. While some of these ceremonies aim to create and confirm new kinship ties between two families, others are said to bring matriomonal luck and happiness. As the institution of marriage establishes culturally approved relations for reproduction, the rich symbolism of weddings will allude to royalty, fertility and prosperity. In the following I will provide an overview of some common religious and cultural practices related to Sikh weddings at Varanasi.

## BETROTHAL

Traditionally, marriages in the Punjabi society were formally settled by a betrothal ceremony called *mangna*, (literally “to ask for”). The family of the bride usually approached the groom's family to stipulate a marriage agreement. The ceremony of *mangna* was an affair of men and the elders in a village. Together with the barber, a

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<sup>612</sup> See e.g. Mathur 1964, Jaspal Singh 1966, Balwinderjeet Kaur 1967, Rajagopalan & Singh 1967, Leaf 1972, Gheerdhyal Singh 1974, Parry 1979, Hershman 1981, Jyoti 1992.

selected group of male relatives on the bride's side travelled to the house of the groom-to-be, bringing lumped brown sugar (*gur*), dry fruits, money and other gifts depending on their financial status. In the presence of village elders, and some religious functionary, the bride's party ceremonially handed over the gifts to the groom seated on a wooden platform. He bit one of the sweets and sometimes the bride's party put money in his lap, while the union of the two families was verbally declared.<sup>613</sup> In some communities it was the groom's party who went to the house of the bride to perform the *mangna* ceremony by offering sweets, money, clothes, and jewellery that was distributed to the bride's relatives. In either case, the betrothal was seen as an agreement between the families and the bride did not participate in the ceremony. As her relatives returned home, she and her family members were often given gifts from the groom's family, such as ornaments, sweets, dry fruits, money, and often the bridal shawl (*chuni*). If the families had not already settled a date for the wedding, it was the duty of the bride's family to determine an auspicious date. The barber, or some other messenger from the brides' side, conveyed a regular invitation by letter to the family of the groom, which was replied to with a gift to the house of the bride.

Contemporary practices of betrothal display just as many similarities as differences. Instead of the traditional *mangna* ceremony the two families knitting together bonds will arrange a ceremony called *roka* or *thaka*, literally "reservation", during which the parents and other relatives of the prospective couple get together at a place by appointment, either at the house of the bride or in the gurdwara, to settle the wedding.<sup>614</sup> *Roka* is a modern custom reflecting that marriages are more considered to be a concern of the individual families rather than the community at large. The key acts of this ceremony are to decide the wedding day, sometimes with consideration of auspicious dates suggested by an astrologer, the performance of the *Ardas* and exchange of gifts. When the reservation is settled and the wedding announced, the becoming bride and her family will be offered monetary gifts, gold and the shawl for the wedding.

Due to the influence of Western traditions, many families in urban settings have come to perform a ring ceremony, in which the couple exchanges golden rings to wear during the wedding. It is generally the bride's family who organizes this ceremony, including a music program, at their residence or rented assembly rooms.

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<sup>613</sup> In some communities it was the groom's party who went to the house of the bride to perform the *mangna* ceremony by offering sweets, money, clothes, and jewellery that was distributed to the bride's relatives (Wikeley 1991: 36, Rose 1999(1919): 784 ff).

<sup>614</sup> In a study of marriage practices in Jalandhar district, Hershman observed that his informants chose to perform the more simplified ceremony *thaka* or *roka* instead of the traditional *mangna* ceremony. As Hershman writes, "It is a type of promising which precedes the engagement so that the ritual of *mangni* is performed prior to the *viah* [marriage] at the village of the bride on the arrival of the groom's marriage party. By this, both engagement and marriage are performed together and the groom's side is saved the expense of having to feast their kinsmen twice as they were enjoined to do traditionally both at marriage and engagement" (Hershman 1981: 162).

When a Sikh couple and good friends of mine celebrated their ring ceremony in Varanasi, for instance, the bride and groom were seated on chairs in the dining hall of a rented restaurant, surrounded by male and female relatives on both sides. The head *granthi* of Gurubagh Gurdwara was invited to read an *Ardas* with all participants forming a circle. After the bride had been decorated with a golden shawl by her mother-in-law the couple simply exchanged golden rings like a Christian wedding and were then offered sweets to each other and the closest family members. The party continued far into the night with bhangra music and folk dances.

The ritual which resembles the traditional betrothal ceremony and seems to have more or less replaced it today is known as *shagan*. Three days prior to the wedding the groom's family will set up an unbroken reading of Guru Granth Sahib, either in the gurdwara or at the house. When the recitation comes to an end on the day before the wedding a group of delegates from the bride's side will visit the groom and his family with signs of the betrothal in the form of gifts to the groom. Before starting the ceremony everyone joins the Sikh prayer, and if Guru Granth Sahib is installed at the house, the *granthi* may be invited to take a *Hukam* for the auspicious occasion. Afterwards the groom will be seated on a platform holding a red cloth in his lap on which various gifts will be placed. The bride's father first places a *tikka*, a vermillion mark, on the groom's forehead as a blessing and then puts a bracelet on his right hand. He then feeds the groom with sweets. Other male relatives similarly mark his forehead and place various gifts, including envelopes containing money, in the groom's lap. All put sweets in the mouth of the groom and he will also be given a decorated basket filled with dry fruits and sweets. From this basket he should pick a piece of dried fruit, bite off one half and return the remaining half to the bride.

*Shagan* is also the occasion when the bride's family presents the groom and his family with other gifts according to their financial status. In one ceremony I participated in, the male relatives of the bride handed over a television, household articles, ornaments, and suitcases with suits to the groom. *Shagan* provides an opportunity to invite relatives and friends for celebration and the ceremony often includes the singing of wedding songs and folk dancing. The public acceptance of the groom, the feasting, and the exchange of gifts are the essential confirmation of the new alliance between two families. The only one who does not participate in the celebrations is the bride, her mother, bridesmaid, and other female relatives. In the evening of *shagan* some female relatives from the groom's house will visit the bride in her residence to hand over a set of counter gifts, including henna, a make-up kit, jewelry, and the dress (*doli*) which she will wear when escorted to the house of her in-laws after marriage.

#### PREPARATIONS

The weeks before a Sikh wedding are busy. Ornamental invitations cards are printed and distributed to relatives far and near; new clothes, jewelry and other gifts are purchased for the couple and other family members, and catering services and wedding palaces for the various receptions are booked.

Depending on different family customs, the behavior of both the bride and the groom should be chaperoned for forty days before the marriage and from three to ten days prior to the wedding day they should be confined to their respective houses. During this period the girl should not use ornaments or cosmetics, and is not permitted to go out alone. The period of seclusion is called *maiyan* and is marked by different preparations for the wedding day, including several symbolic acts to signify the transformational process of the bridal couple. The marriage ceremony qualifies as a rite of passage that comprises different stages of identity transformation. During the period of *maiyan* the bride and groom wear simple clothes and are held in confinement, but after a ritual bath on the wedding day they dress up in their wedding gowns as royalties on public display to mark their transformation from virgin-daughter to married woman, and from bachelor to husband. In the “ritual process” of a Sikh wedding the couple hovers between two extremes – from seclusion and neglect of the outward appearance to the most exclusive bodily ornamentations.

In some families the period of *maiyan* formally starts when the boy and girl separately receive a red thread (*mauli*) tied around their wrists by a family member or the barber’s wife. Among other social groups the ceremony of tying the *mauli* is performed after the couple is anointed with oil and bathed a few days before the wedding, or on the wedding day. During *maiyan* both the bride and the groom wear more simple and understated clothes than in daily life. They are also well fed, often with sweet and fried food that comes from the house of their maternal uncles. During this period the boy and the girl are considered to be passing to a different phase of their lives and their seclusion sometimes evokes popular beliefs in ghosts and the evil eye. The couple is considered more vulnerable to influences of spirits and should be protected by isolation.<sup>615</sup> Furthermore, the Punjabi culture holds the concept of *bhanimar*, people who try to ruin a new relationship by commenting on the couple and insinuating doubts in the minds of the people, in contrast to the role of the matchmaking *vichola*. The preparatory stage of becoming a couple is thought to accentuate malevolent forces of both spirits and human backbiters.

A few days prior to the wedding the women on both sides gather in the evenings for what is generally called *ladies sangit*, the singing of specific folksongs associated with the occasion. Sikh families in Varanasi who were about to marry off their son or daughter would invite women of the community to perform the hymn *Sukhmani Sahib* for 51 or more times and in the evening sing folk songs and dance to laughter and clapping. In the house of the bride the folk songs are called *suhaag*, which in the context of marriage refers to the marital felicity or a happily married woman. As the dominant social values in Punjabi society remain patriarchal, the preservation of the family’s health and happiness is generally considered to be the responsibility of

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<sup>615</sup> Hershman 1981: 163. The groom might be taken out in a procession in his village, wearing dirty clothes and holding a sword to shield him from the harmful influences of spirits (Jamous 2003, Wikeley 1991).

the woman. Emotionally these *suhag* songs express the woman's uprooting and separation from her family and home and the unknown fate she will have to adjust to. The lyrics of *suhag* songs are often structured as dialogues between the bride-to-be and her father, who tells her to bow to the inevitable. The songs sung at the house of the groom are called *ghorian* and are usually composed as blessings of the mother and sisters to the knightly groom who will go to meet his bride. At this event the women may tie a turban on their head and jestingly imitate the groom amid great laughter. The sisters will also tie a thread around his wrist which is to be opened by the bride after the wedding.

On the evening prior to the wedding day the bride, her bridesmaid(s), and other women of the house will gather for a program with food, music and ceremonies to prepare the girl for the wedding. In a Khatri family the bride-to-be and her chosen bridesmaid sat on a small wooden chair on the floor to have their untied hair and heads repeatedly brushed with oil mixed with herbal power by female relatives. The women fed the bride with sweets, some of which were sent from the groom's house. To bring good luck to the marriage the ladies of the house repeatedly waved money bills over the bride's head (*sirvarna*) and stepped five times over the wooden pall on which bride had been seated. The women would then offer the bride thick brown henna (*mehndi*) to be used for dying her hands and feet with ornamental designs. The ceremonial beautification of the bride is connected with ideas of her good fortune in the house of her in-laws. As one saying goes, if the applied henna turns out very dark on the hand of the bride it is a sign of the affection of her mother-in-law to be. Women therefore try to make the henna color as dark as possible. Sometimes the hands of the groom are similarly decorated with more simple henna designs or just a small mark to indicate that he is getting married. Like most events in the Punjabi culture there are special songs associated with *mehndi* to communicate sentiments of the marriage preparations.

The night before the wedding the groom's maternal aunt (*mami*) and other female relatives dress up in beautiful clothes and organize a night procession of light called *jago*. Whereas women used to arrange the *jago* procession after the groom and the marriage procession had departed from the house (*barat*) to wake up people and convey the message that a fortuitous event was about to occur, it has more recently become a ceremony that is performed on the evening or night prior to the wedding. On this occasion the groom's maternal aunt carries a decorated pitcher on her head, sometimes with a coconut or lit flour lamps placed on top of the pitcher. The women walk to a well in their neighborhood or the nearby gurdwara to bring water which is mixed with water used for the ritual bathing the day after. The women sing and dance in company with a team of folk musicians and teasingly ask the groom for return gifts for bringing the water.



A Sikh bridal couple.

In the morning of the wedding day the bride and the groom will go through a ritual purification called *kahare charna*, or “ascending the basket”. Seated on a small wooden platform under a canopy or an embroidered cloth (*phulkari*) both the bride and the groom will at their respective locations be ceremonially anointed with a paste (*vatna*) made of mustard oil, barley flour and turmeric mixed up with fresh curd. In the case of the bride it is usually her sisters and female friends who are rubbing her arms, feet and face five times each while singing songs, whereas in the house of the boy this is done by his kinswomen, who jokingly entertain the groom-to-be with naughty commentary. The ritual anointing marks the end of the period of seclusion and the beginning of a new stage in life. Afterwards both the bride and the groom discard their old robes and take a bath. To demarcate the transformation of their identity both the bride and the groom crush five clay pots on the ground with their feet before they dress up in their special dresses. The family hangs laurel or banana leaves above the front door to show that their house is a wedding house. For the next few hours they will be busy ironing clothes, combing, doing make-up and tying turbans.

The traditional bridal dress in the Punjab is exceptionally ornamental, alluding to a royal symbolism. The maternal uncle (*mama*) or the maternal kin group (*nanake*) of the bride and groom play a significant ritual role in the preparations. As the custom prescribes, he should offer the clothes (*jora jama*) worn by the bride and groom on the wedding day, along with jewellery, clothes and other gifts to his sister’s family. On the wedding day he will give the bride her red ivory bangles (*chura*), signify-



ing a married woman and which she should wear for forty days. The maternal uncle will also tie a red thread around her wrist and give her bangles that are attached with a hanging trinket or bells (*kalira*). A popular saying proclaims that any unmarried girl who is hit by these bridal *kalira* will be the next one to wed. From top to toe the bride is adorned with ornaments. On her forehead she wears a trinket (*tikka*). A nose pin or a nose ring (*nath*) is linked with a chain to her earrings (*jhumke*). It is customary to wear two kinds of necklaces, of which one is a golden garland (*har*) and the other a necklace with ornamental designs similar to Muslim amulets (*taviz*). The bride is also adorned with finger rings (*mundirian*), anklets (*jhanjharan*) and a thread with bells (*parandi*) braided in her hair. Upon arrival at the wedding ceremony she is veiled in the shawl given to her by her soon to be in-laws.

At the groom's house the boy is dressed up in new clothes, wearing a red or pink colored turban and shoes (*juti*) embroidered with golden threads. Before he leaves the house his maternal uncle and the women of the house perform a small ceremony called *Sehra bandhna*, or "tying the chaplet". Seated on a chair the groom is decorated with a small plume (*kalgi*) on his turban and the sisters apply *surma*, collyrium powder, to his eyes in order to protect him from evil influences. Over his turban they tie a chaplet (*sehra*) which will cover his eyes until the wedding and be opened in the gurdwara. He is given a sword to guard himself and will be flanked with his *sarbala*, a younger brother or cousin who will act as an escort. The marriage party of the groom which goes out on a ceremonial procession to the house of the bride is called *barat*. As Sikh weddings are nowadays performed in a public gurdwara the bride's family usually rents a restaurant or marriage palace close by the gurdwara which represents the bridal house. The departure of the *barat* is usually a joyful event where people sing and dance to Punjabi folk tunes and the rhythm of drums (*dhol*). Traditionally the groom should ride a white mare to his wedding. Although most Sikh families have come to use white cars decorated in flowers, especially when the wedding takes place at a distant location, they may rent a horse for the day to maintain the auspicious customs related to the groom's mounting of the mare. Before departure of *barat* the groom symbolically tests his sword and the sisters feed the horse with pulses, tie a colourful thread around its neck, and teasingly refuse to release the reins until they have been given some gifts or money. The marriage party will read a Sikh supplication and then set out on a procession which slowly moves through the city accompanied by music and dance.

The reception of *barat* at the house of the bride was traditionally carried out in the presence of the whole village the night before the wedding. All kinsmen would observe the ceremony *Milni*, literally "meeting", during which they exchanged gifts and shared a meal in an open space, while the women celebrated separately after the wedding. The groom did not participate in this formal meeting but stayed at a place outside the village until his wedding the following day. Today Sikhs families combine the formal meeting of male and female relatives and gather for a shared reception before the wedding. On the arrival of the marriage party the groom is blessed by his in-laws-to-be while kinsfolk on both sides sing *gurbani* hymns. When all the rela-

tives have gathered (except for the bride) the *granthi* is invited to perform an *Ardas*. The two parties of the groom and the bride line up on opposite sides to formally meet and embrace each other, beginning with the bride's father and the groom's father who exchange gifts and flower garlands and then it is the turn of the mothers on both sides. After refreshments they continue to the gurdwara. To show respect for the Guru Granth Sahib the chaplet and plume fastened on the groom's turban is removed before he enters the gurdwara. As a *granthi* said, not even the groom should be dressed as a king when approaching the Guru.

#### THE BLISSFUL CEREMONY

The religiously sanctioned ceremony that contracts a Sikh marriage is *Anand karaj* or *Anand sanskar*, the "blissful ceremony", which is always performed in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh congregation. The most important element of the wedding is the four *lavan*, or the clockwise circumambulations around the Guru Granth Sahib. Meanwhile the *ragi* sings the four stanzas *Suhi Chhant* 2 (pp. 773 – 774) of Guru Ram Das which are popularly referred to as the *Char lavan*. Sikhs in general trace the wedding ceremony back to the days of Guru Amar Das and his successor Guru Ram Das, who, according to a popular story, wrote the four stanzas to assert Sikh independence from Hindu practices and the Brahmins.<sup>616</sup> After the period of human Gurus the Sikhs are said to have drifted towards Hindu customs and substituted the four circulations around the Sikh scripture with the seven circumambulations around the sacred fire (*havan*) which stipulate Hindu marriages. In the nineteenth century the Sikh reform movements revived the Sikh wedding ceremony in presence of Guru Granth Sahib, which also gained legal recognition in 1909 when the government of the Punjab passed the *The Anand Marriage Act*.

In Varanasi, *Anand karaj* is the stipulated practice to tie nuptial bonds in Sikh and Sindhi families. Particularly the recitations and singing of the *Char lavan* and the four circumambulations around the Guru Granth Sahib are perceived as the contractual acts of marriage. Religious Sikhs often emphasize the importance of the authoritative presence of the Guru dwelling within the scripture and the congregation of Sikhs. The organization of linguistic acts and bodily acts within the structure of the wedding ceremony makes a marriage binding only if it has been recognized and blessed by the Guru.

The wedding ceremony normally begins with *kirtan*, performed by *ragis*, in order to create a religious atmosphere. The groom and his party will be the first to arrive at the gurdwara and after the customary *matha tekna* takes his place facing the Guru Granth Sahib. The bride, accompanied with her family, comes later and takes a seat on the left side of the groom. When all have gathered the bride and groom and

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<sup>616</sup> The wedding ceremony is called *Anand Karaj* because the first five stanzas of Guru Amardas composition *Anand Sahib* had been a part of the ritual. According to a popular tradition, Guru Amardas recited *Anand Sahib* when his daughter Bibi Bhani was married to Bhai Jetha, who later became known as the fourth Guru Ramdas.

their parents are requested to stand up while the *granthi* presents an *Ardas* in which he asks the Guru permission to conduct the wedding. Afterwards the *granthi* takes a guiding *Hukam* for the couple to be wedded.

The *ragi* gives a short sermon addressed to the couple about their mutual duties and obligations according to the Guru's teaching. He emphasizes that marriage is not merely a social contract but should be seen as the merging of two souls which complete humans. They enter the householder life which is the ideal state of seeking union with God. The boy should regard his wife-to-be as his better half and protect and honor her. The girl should remain loyal to her husband and serve him in times of joy and sorrow. Together they should base their life and relationship on love, respect, and compromises.

The assumed responsibility of the couple is further reinforced in the following act called *Pale ki rasam*, during which the father of the bride passes a pink or red shawl over the groom's shoulder and places the hem of it in the hands of the bride. At the same time the *ragi* sings two lines of a *gurbani* hymn especially addressed to the bride:

From my mind, O Nanak, I have wholly banished praising and slandering others and have forsaken and abandoned all other worldly affairs. I have seen all the kinsmen to be false; then have I attached myself to Thine skirt, O my Lord.<sup>617</sup>

Patrilocal traditions make the bride a member of the groom's family with whom she will live. According to a local *ragi*, when the bride listens to these words and the expositions that follow "she makes a promise in front of God that she is giving up all her good and bad things, she will leave her parents to be united with a man. Her responsibility is with her husband now, not with her native family."

The core act of the wedding ceremony is the recitation of the *Char lavan* and the couple's four circumambulations around the Guru Granth Sahib. The *granthi* will read the first verse from the enthroned scripture. The *ragi* may then explicate the verse in speech and then repeat the same verse in a singing style. Meanwhile the couple performs *matha tekna* and offers money before the scripture, after which the groom will slowly lead the bride around the scripture in a clockwise direction. When the couple have completed a circle they do *matha tekna* again and resume their seats. The same pattern with recitation, singing and circumambulation will be repeated for each verse of *Char lavan*. By making the circular movements around the physical body of the text the boy and the girl confirm to themselves, the congregation and the Guru embodied in the scripture, their new relation.

Like other Sikh ceremonies the wedding ends with the singing of an abbreviated form of the composition *Anand Sahib*, a reading of *Ardas* in which the *granthi* presents the couple and the acts performed, and a repetition of the *Hukam*. As a final

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<sup>617</sup> GGS: 963.

moment of the ceremony the *granthi* will decorate the couple with flower garlands and thank the families for conducting a wedding in accordance with the Sikh way of life and the Guru's teaching.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE SIKH WEDDING CEREMONY

1. The groom enters the gurdwara and performs *matha tekna* before Guru Granth Sahib
2. The bride enters the gurdwara and performs *matha tekna* before Guru Granth Sahib
3. The *granthi* leads the congregation in an *Ardas*
4. The *granthi* takes a *Hukam* from Guru Granth Sahib
5. The *granthi* or the *ragi* instructs the couple on marriage life
6. The couple bow before Guru Granth Sahib
7. The bride's father connects the bride and groom with a shawl
8. The *granthi* recites the first stanza of *Suhi Chhant*
9. The couple performs *matha tekna*, offers money and circumambulates the Guru Granth Sahib to the *ragis'* singing of the first *lavan*
10. The couple performs *matha tekna* and takes a seat
11. Point 7 to 9 is repeated in the same manner for the three remaining stanzas until the four circumambulations have been completed
12. The *ragis* will perform the first five verses and the last verse of *Anand Sahib*
13. The *granthi* leads the congregation in an *Ardas*
14. The *granthi* repeats the *Hukam* from Guru Granth Sahib
13. Distribution of *karah prashad*
15. Speeches to the couple
16. The couple is garlanded by the *granthi*

Figure 21.

#### DEPARTURE AND INCORPORATION

The ceremonies following a Sikh wedding are often charged with mixed emotions of joy and sorrow. Jokingly, the bride's sisters often play a game with the groom, in which they hide his shoes, while his friends try to prevent the girls from doing this. The sisters-in-law make sure they give the groom a hard time and negotiate over monetary gifts in return for his shoes. After the wedding the two parties will again move to a marriage palace which represents the native home of the bride. The newly weds are seated on chairs like royalty to be adorned, congratulated, and given gifts. Framed by sadder emotions is the bride's final departure (*vidai*) and separation from her family and parental home. In a symbolic gesture of the transition she retires to a room and takes off the dress given by her maternal uncle before the wedding and then dresses up in a suit offered to her by her in-laws. When the bride returns with her sister, the *granthi* from the gurdwara will perform an *Ardas* in which he gives thanks for the successful completion of the ceremony and seeks a blessing for the newly weds. At the gate of the marriage palace the bride throws rice, barley or pulses over her head, while wishing prosperity for the family and house she is leaving. The

bride's brother then escorts her to a decorated car which has replaced the traditional palanquin (*doli*) that was formerly used as transport and carried the bride to her new home at the in-law's house. When the newly wedded couple begins their journey the elders on the groom's side shower small coins over the *doli* and to the crowd on the road. At the *vidai* people again sing sad songs on the theme of separation and departure.

Upon arrival at the house of the groom, the groom's mother is responsible for ceremonies related to the reception of the newly-weds. At the gate she receives them by circulating a small water-filled metal vessel over their heads and then drinking some of the water five times. The mother either sprinkles or smears the threshold with mustard oil and offers the couple sweets before they may enter the threshold with the auspicious right foot first. Traditionally, the face of the bride would be veiled until after the marriage and it was only the matchmaker who got to see the bride in advance. As a part of the wedding ceremony, there was a specific ritual of unveiling the bride: in the house of the in-laws, the younger brother of the groom should lift the veil and expose the face of the bride, while her in-laws made comments about her looks and offered her some money, minimally a silver coin. Although the traditional seclusion of women is extinct, the Sikhs in Varanasi are formally bringing the bride into the house to meet her new relatives and be offered gifts of money. They feed the bride with a mixture of rice and pulses (*khicheri*) to mark out her incorporation into a new family.

To make the bride feel at home the couple may engage in a set of games in the evening. For instance, they fill a pot with milk and water and throw a ring or coin into the pot. Whoever catches the coin the most times wins the game and, as the saying goes, becomes the dominant partner in married life. They also try to untie the thread that they had tied on their wrists before the wedding. While the girl is allowed to use both her hands, the groom must use only one hand. This is an occasion for the bride, as well as relatives and friends, to tease the groom if he is unable to undo the knot. In the past, this and other games probably provided the new couple the opportunity of making one's acquaintances and initiating the first physical touching of the opposite sex.

The morning after the wedding night the bride performs additional symbolic acts to confirm her new status as a married woman. Presuming the couple has been intimate in the night, the bride touches the feet of her parents-in-law, both mother and father. In return they bless their daughter-in-law by wishing her a long life as their son's wife. After the first wedding night she may also make a meal which is served to everyone in her new family in exchange of money from her mother-in-law. As the woman becomes a new member of a family and clan, these customs are said to initiate her responsibilities in the family. During the days to follow the bride and groom will visit the gurdwara for thanksgiving and revisit the house of the bride's parents.

## DEATH

The intersection between death and religion and the various ways by which people respond to death, expected or unexpected, continue to fascinate scholars. Death presents a context for expressing religious values and for making meaning and community.<sup>618</sup> Living at Varanasi, death is always present at the two major cremation grounds on the riverbank of the Ganga – Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat. In the Hindu world Varanasi is widely famed for granting liberation to all who die in the city. Given this, scholars have directed considerable attention to practices before and after death in the Hindu tradition and their religious significations.<sup>619</sup> In the following I will exemplify how Sikhs residing within this cultural framework may respond to death and conduct ceremonies in relation to local customs.

#### AT THE DEATH BED

In general, Sikhs will reject the idea that there are auspicious times and places to die – a view for which they find support in the Gurus’ teachings and often use in response to the predominantly Hindu culture they dwell in.<sup>620</sup> Whatever a human receives in life, even her own dying and death, is submitted to the decision of God and one’s accumulation of karma in this and previous life. A middle-aged Sikh woman said:

A human has to suffer according to what God has written and she has to suffer here. Dying is real suffering, when the soul goes out that is really a hard time. ...In this area a woman died. Two days before [she died] she did the reading of *Sukhmani Sahib*. She was well, got some trouble in the night and died in the morning. Everyone was saying that she had done really good karma and got a good death.

Although my interlocutors did not attach any significance to the time and place of dying, they shared the pan-Indian notions of a “good death” and a “bad death”, and would take up a few practices to secure the former and mitigate the latter. In general a natural and voluntary death in old age without too much physical suffering is recognized as a “good death.” Especially those considered spiritually gifted, or even liberated while remaining in life, know the time of their own death and will prepare their body and mind and the social circle for the final departure. A Sikh woman in her middle-age told about her maternal grandfather who was reputed in the society for his devotion and humbleness. When he became ill at an old age the man dreamt about a river of milk in the middle of which a *sant* was standing and calling him home. The next morning he gathered the family members to inform them of his abandonment of life and that he must depart within two days to do *puja-path* in heaven (*svarg*). At his request the family kept his sandals and shorts (*kaccha*) beside

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<sup>618</sup> Garces-Foley 2006.

<sup>619</sup> See e.g. Parry 1994 and Justice 1997.

<sup>620</sup> Only a male interlocutor mentioned that if a person dies during the time of *panchak*, the five consecutive lunar mansions, he will bring five other family members with him in death.

his bed to make him prepared for the journey after this life. As the man predicted he died two days later.

A good death occurs when the person has completed a life-time and fulfilled all social responsibilities. At the moment of death the person should dissolve all bonds to relations and be free from desires to the world to only think of God. "You will not even feel when that person is gone", a Sikh man illustrated how a good death is a controlled relinquishment of life and worldly attachments. As is the Hindu custom, the dying will control their consumption of food and be given *Ganga amrit* in their mouth to prepare the body for the final departure. In Varanasi the Sikhs will bring this water from the well in Nichibagh Gurdwara. The most significant means to secure a good death is to die to the sound of *gurbani*. Persons who envisage their own death will commit themselves to recitations of *Sukhmani Sahib*, as this particular composition is believed to destroy sins and bring a good destiny after death. In case the dying person is too weak to recite, family members will read and sometimes whisper the sacred words in his or her ear. Many would also say that listening to recitals and singing of any *gurbani* hymn will assist the dying in the life after death. A Sikh woman told a story about a Muslim imam who hid in a gurdwara when the messengers of death came to seize him. As she noted, the messengers of *Yama* – the Lord of Death – normally beat the dying terribly but they never touch those who are reciting *gurbani* and never enter sacred spaces like mandirs or gurdwaras. The imam died while listening to Sikh *kirtan*. When he reached the divine court to have the books of his actions closed, *Chitra Gupt* – the accountant of *Yama* – could not find any good action registered. Because the imam listened to *kirtan* at the time of death he was, however, reprieved from punishment and granted permission to choose his future destiny.

A "bad death", by contrast, can be when a person at old age is suffering from diseases and pain for a long time without getting a release from life. It also signifies a premature and involuntary death often caused by violence. Homicide and accidents, such as drowning and burning to death, belong to this latter category. Suicide is also regarded a bad death as it is considered an act of violence that relinquishes life before the prescribed life-time has been fulfilled. The deaths of martyrs and soldiers are exempted from this rule as they voluntarily sacrifice their lives for a just cause. In case the dying had some desires at the hour of death or did not get a proper cremation ritual performed there are possibilities that the spirit will be caught between the earthly domain and the divine abode and become a *bhutpret*, a ghost. The fear of ghostly existences, I was told, is one reason as to why people are conducting post-mortem rituals and prayers for the peace of the departed soul.

Although Sikhs in general accept a medical-legal definition of death when the brain and heart cease to function and a doctor is called in to declare the person dead, many still believe that the spirit is present in the world until cremation. An elderly woman explained:

When a person dies, after death he can see and listen to what is happening around him, but he cannot speak. He can see that people are crying beside his dead body. When they bring him to the cremation place, when they offer the fire, he is seeing even that! In *gurbani* there is a stanza saying; when Yama's staff hits you then you won't remember. It takes time to get this head burnt and after that you do not remember a thing. He does not know the worldly things after that.

According to this perception the spirit of the dead person is conscious and able to observe his surrounding until the fire fully consumes the head during the cremation ceremony. Considering this, rituals for preparing the dead for cremation and the cremation itself are especially important for the soul's proper departure from the body.

#### THE DEATH OF DEVI

The immediate response to death among Sikhs are various, depending on many factors such as the circumstances of a death, local family traditions, origin, status, gender and age of the deceased and which family members are left behind. Sikhs do not have any set duration for mourning and discourage public expressions of grief. Nonetheless, businessmen usually close their shops for at least four days after a death in the family and keep a period of mourning until they have completed a reading of the scripture. There are several actions most Sikh families take between the time of death and when the body leaves the house for cremation: immediately after death they arrange readings of *gurbani* hymns, give the dead body a bath, dress it and pay the last respects to the deceased at the house. To illustrate how families may act I will exemplify with the death of Devi, the mother of a Khatri household.

Devi was of old age and died a natural death. When it was clear that her hours were numbered, her daughter-in-law brought *Ganga amrit* from Nichibagh Gurdwara and poured it in her mouth. The son went for a doctor but when they returned Devi had already passed away. Immediately the family placed her body on the ground in her private room with the feet directed southwards. As death had entered their home the family stopped cooking at their house and obtained food from relatives residing outside the household. As long as the dead body was in the house and up to the eleventh day after death all family members also slept on the floor. As most of Devi's relatives lived in Punjab and it would take two days before they could arrive in Varanasi, the family covered the whole body with ice. In the meantime, they lit incense for Devi and played cassette tapes with Sikh *kirtan* and *Sukhmani Sahib*. The morning after the death the daughter-in-law cried unrestrainedly, wherefore her husband told her to play tapes to pacify her emotions. "This *shabad kirtan* gives you relief," she explained. "There is a limit even to crying but *kirtan* tells you that this is the last truth, it tells that this body is going, but nothing goes with it...the sons and daughters...everything is here."



When the relatives from Punjab arrived in Varanasi the family prepared Devi for *antim bheta*, or the “last offering”, where all mourners pay a last respect to her before cremation. Two hours before this ceremony they removed the ice from the body and washed it with curd from the market. They opened up Devi’s hair and dressed her in a new *shalwar qamiz*, which came from the house of her parents in the style she used to like. The daughter-in-law remarked that the chief symbol of the Sikhs – the hair (*kesh*) – should be covered with a cloth and, in the case of a man, a new turban may be tied on the head. If the deceased has undergone the ceremony *Khande di pahul* and is a Khalsa Sikh who keeps the five symbols, he or she should be adorned with the comb (*kangha*), the steel bracelet (*kara*), breeches (*kachhaira*) and the dagger (*kirpan*). As the daughter-in-law informed, the drawstring (*nara*) of the female trousers (*shalwar*) should be untied but she did not know for which purpose. She put forward the matter to one of her aunts, regarded as knowledgeable, but neither did she know the reason. Meanwhile the men prepared a wooden board with bamboo poles for carrying Devi to the cremation. After her body was washed and dressed the son shrouded it with a white sheet made of cotton (*kaffan*) and tied the body tight to the board with cords. The family and community members were then invited to pay a last respect by folding their hands towards Devi and placing woolen shawls over the shroud. The latter is a typical Punjabi custom and frequently a pile of shawls will cover the bier before it reaches the cremation ground. Wool is considered to be both a pure and costly fabric, and this combination makes it an ideal offering to a respected community member. All the female relatives younger to Devi gathered in a small ceremony at the bier where they presented flowers and money, which they offered at her feet while saying: “If we made any mistakes please forgive us”. The daughter-in-law accounted for this action as taking the “dust of the feet” (*charan raj*) of a person held in respect, and continued: “If someone is coming to my house I take the dust from his or her feet and put it on my forehead. I’m thinking this is a great person and if I will do that I will also get the knowledge. But all this depends on your own feelings (*bhavana*).” The *granthi* was invited from the gurdwara to perform an *Ardas* in the name of Devi before the bier was lifted up on a truck and left the house in a procession of all the male mourners heading for the cremation ground.

As soon as the mourning party departed the women of the house went by foot to the nearby gurdwara at Ashok Nagar colony for a visit. There they performed *panj ishmana* – washing their hands, feet and face – and *mattha tekna* in front of the Guru Granth Sahib. On their way back to the house they chose another route to the one they arrived on. The daughter-in-law and all the female relatives took a bath, dressed in clean clothes and started to clean up all the rooms in the house. Similarly the female mourners from the neighborhood went to their houses and returned after they had taken a bath. Relatives told the daughter-in-law that all belongings of a dead person should not be kept in a living house and thus she collected all the clothes, mattresses, and bed sheets used by Devi and gave them to sweepers. Afterwards the women shared a meal in which the food came from the house of Devi’s parents. As the daughter-in-law told me, in case the deceased was a married woman the first

meal after her body has left the house should come from her parental home. When the son and the male relatives returned from the cremation ground they were not allowed to touch anyone in the household before taking a bath. The women hanged clean clothes in the bathroom that remained untouched until they had completed their purification. The clothes they had worn at the cremation ground were first made wet before they left them to be washed.

The day after cremation and on the fourth day after death, the family invited all female relatives and women of the Sikh congregation to participate in a joint recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib* at their house. As Devi had died a “good death” at an old age, the women were offered *sukha prashad*,<sup>621</sup> or a sweet *prashad* made of small sugar cakes (*batasa*) when the reading was completed. In the evening the family invited a *ragi jatha* from the gurdwara to perform *kirtan* for the mourners. In the following days the women continued to gather at their house in the afternoons for *Sukhmani Sahib* readings while the family arranged an *Akhand path* in the gurdwara.<sup>622</sup> The daughter-in-law explained that *Akhand path* should be performed between the eleventh and thirteenth day after death and preferably at the house of the deceased: “People are saying that if you are having *Akhand path* in your home the house becomes pure”. In her own case she felt that her family could not provide a space which was sufficiently clean and peaceful for the reading, and accordingly her husband booked one in the gurdwara. Since a major Sikh festival coincided with their plans they scheduled the completion of the reading on the seventh day after death, when everyone congregated in the gurdwara to express their condolences and presented a last prayer for Devi.

#### THE LAST JOURNEY

The death procession from the house of the deceased to the cremation ground is generally called *antim yatra*, the last journey. All relatives, women and men, may participate in this procession and before proceeding to the cremation place at Manikarnika Ghat the mourning party comes for an obligatory halt in the gurdwara where several acts are carried out for the deceased. In general the mourning parties in Varanasi pass by Nichibagh as the gurdwara is within walking distance from river Ganga and also holds the well of *Ganga amrit* to be offered to the dead. However when the mourners are of a great number, as in the case when a famous and respected community member has passed away, it is just as doable in the larger Gurubagh Gurdwara a few kilometres away from the cremation ground. Nowadays these mourning processions usually transport the biers on cars or trailers, and carry them by hand on the last part of the journey to the cremation ground.

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<sup>621</sup> *Sukha prashad* sometimes refers to the *prashad* containing hemp (*Canabis Indica*), but in this context designates a sweet or “happy” *prashad*.

<sup>622</sup> In other families the women would gather after three to four days after a death and read *Janam-sakhis*, stories on the life and deeds of Guru Nanak.

The dead body is brought into the courtyard of the gurdwara but should under no circumstances enter the inner sanctum where Guru Granth Sahib is installed as the body carries pollution. The chief mourners place it on the outside, with the head of the dead aligned toward the place of the scripture, and gather in a semicircle. The *granthi* performs three subsequent acts for the dead: firstly he brings filtered *Ganga amrit* from the well inside the gurdwara, opens the shroud and pours the water into the mouth of the dead. Next he takes out a two-meters-long yellow or saffron colored robe of honor (*sirropa*) in cotton and covers the complete body with the cloth. On top of the robe he may place garlands of marigold in circles. As the third and final moment the *granthi* performs an *Ardas* at the feet of the corpse.

There are many explanations of the ritual acts in this brief ceremony in the gurdwara. Since the ensuing cremation ceremony at Manikarnika Ghat is carried out within the ritual domain of Hindu funeral priests, even if the Sikh *granthi* is present and plays a significant role, the visit at the gurdwara is the Sikh way of preparing the deceased soul for the last fire sacrifice. Some think the halt offers the soul, which is still present after death, a chance to pay a final visit at the Guru's house to take *darshan* and make the last act of contrition. A Sikh woman explained, "The body is placed in the hall outside the gurdwara to let it [the soul] say it is sorry for its sins." Giving a robe of honor is an illustrative example of how Sikhs often translate themes from Guru Granth into actual practice. In one hymn Nanak tells how the Sikhs are embellished with robes of honor in the divine court.<sup>623</sup> Metaphors in the sacred text are virtually materialized and become action in the ritual performance. For those that do not continue to the cremation ground the stop at the gurdwara has become the last opportunity to pay reverence to the departed before cremation. Relatives and friends will touch the feet of the corpse, bow at the bier, and enter the gurdwara to offer monetary gifts in the name of the deceased.

From the gurdwara the mourning procession will continue directly to Manikarnika Ghat for cremation. Incense is usually lit and placed at the feet of the bier, while the participants cry out "Satnam Vahiguru" all the way through the narrow lanes leading down to river Ganga. Unless the women follow the procession all the way to the cremation ground, they may gather in the gurdwara to perform recitations of *Japji Sahib*, and later return home to clean the house.

#### THE FIRE SACRIFICE

The two gurdwaras offer the service to book and make the arrangements of funeral pyres for Punjabi and Sindhi families at Manikarnika Ghat. The gurdwara manager will send a *sevadhar* to open up the *Khatri Chabutra*, the platform for cremations of Sikhs, Sindhis and Hindus of the Khatri caste, and arrange the wood. The Sikh gurdwara committee has established agreement with the sellers of wood and resin<sup>624</sup> at the ghat to spare families the usual bargaining and acquire fair settlements, even when

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<sup>623</sup> GGS: 62.

<sup>624</sup> The resin is of the *sal* tree (*Shorea robusta*).

the humid monsoon causes incidental price rises. On one occasion a supplier at Manikarnika Ghat informed that a cremation normally requires 7, 9 or 11 *man* (equal to 40 kilogram) of wood, depending on the size of the body, and would cost between 600 and 1000 rupees. A Sikh interlocutor, who arranged three cremations at the time of my field-work, estimated that the minimum expense for a cremation would be 5000 rupees and could easily rise to the double if all outlays were taken into account. The mourning family is expected to hand over donations to the funeral priest and negotiate with the *dom*, the funeral attendant from an untouchable caste, for the ritual service of giving fire.<sup>625</sup> Before the mourners are allowed to commence the cremation ceremony they need to register the death to the Municipal Corporation, which has registration offices nearby the Manikarnika Ghat.<sup>626</sup>

The Sikh cremation ceremony is called “the last ritual” (*Antim samskar*) or “the fire ritual” (*Agni samskar*), and consists of four central acts: the breaking of an earthen pot (*dhamalak bhanana*),<sup>627</sup> offering the fire (*agni bhent*), reading of *Ardas*, and reciting the hymn *Kirtan Sohila*. When the mourning procession has reached the cremation site, the chief mourner, usually the eldest son of the deceased is given an earthen pot filled with Ganga water which he pours over the dead body from head to feet before breaking the pot into pieces by throwing it on the ground. Scholars have suggested that the pot symbolizes the human skull and the crushing of it thus signifies the release of the soul from the body.<sup>628</sup> The pot cracking may even be interpreted as a symbolic substitute of the traditional custom of *kapal kriya*, “the rite of the skull”, where the mourner was supposed to crack the skull of the dead with a bamboo pole in the middle of the cremation, believing it to be a release of the soul from the material body and the real moment of death.<sup>629</sup> Among my Sikh informants in Varanasi I did not find similar significations attached to the ceremony. A few interlocutors mentioned that the “real” time of death is when Yama hits his staff on the head of the dead and the head is fully destroyed, although they did draw any connection between this concept and the ritualized act of breaking a pot at the cremation ground. The ritual is considered just a prescribed custom of an originally Hindi cremation ceremony which people are instructed to perform. In ceremonies I took part in the act

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<sup>625</sup> In this mentioned case the funeral priest was given 201 rupees. The *dom* started out with 1100 rupees for providing the fire and after some bargaining they were able to cut it down and agree on 500 rupees. At several times I was told that it was supposed to be a set price of 151 rupees for the funeral fire.

<sup>626</sup> After the death the family contact the local council (*sabhashad*) of their residential area to get a certificate of their local registration and sometimes also a certificate of natural death from a doctor. In the case of an accidental death the family also must receive a post-mortem report. These certificates are then handed over to the Municipal Corporation office at the ghat where the death gets registered for a public death certificate.

<sup>627</sup> Kalsi remarks that *dhamalak bhanana* is a changed form of *ardh marag* (Sanskrit) and *addh marag* (Hindi) – the act of breaking a pot on the way to the cremation ground (Kalsi1996: 43).

<sup>628</sup> Kalsi 1994: 151.

<sup>629</sup> Parry 1994: 23 – 24, 177.

did not require the attention of other attendants. The son or grandson would simply pour the water over the dead body and in the same movement fling the pot away, sometimes without getting it crushed.

When the pyre is ready the body is moved from the bier. If a number of woollen sheets have been offered, all except for a few are removed and given to the *dom* as a donation. The corpse, wrapped in a shroud, is lifted up by hand and placed directly on the wooden pyre with the feet in a southerly direction towards the river Ganga. Now the chief mourner opens the upper part of the shroud to anoint the eyes and mouth of the deceased with clarified butter (*ghi*). The rest of the body is then smeared with stripes of *ghi*. Resin is poured all over the body either by the *dom* or mourners before the body is re-covered with the robe of honor. The mourners then place the bamboo poles crosswise over the body, lift up the wooden board and set it on top. The funeral pyre is now completely prepared and all – including the *dom* and the funeral priest – assemble around it in a circle, but with fairly defined positions. The funeral priest stands to the north of the dead, at the head, the chief mourner to the south at the feet, often beside the *dom*. The Sikh *granthi*, who has arrived from the gurdwara to lead the party in prayers, normally places himself on the right or the left side of the chief mourner.

The *granthi* steps out of his sandals to stand barefoot on the ground, turns towards the pyre and starts to recite the *Ardas*. Many regard this as the most crucial part of the cremation ceremony. As one interlocutor put it: "The [Hindu] funeral priest who was there, he performs whatever the custom is over there. That is not really important for us, only the *Ardas* is." The mourners join the reading by standing with folded hands, and some follow the *granthi*'s example and take off their shoes. After its completion all cry out the Sikh *jaikara* and bow towards the pyre and touch the ground with their hands. Immediately after the Hindu funeral priest hands over a sheaf of burning grass to the chief mourner, who circles the pyre three times clockwise holding the burning grass in his right hand, while the Hindu priest recites mantras in Sanskrit. The wood is set on fire at the head and feet of the corpse. When the pyre is in flames the gathering is dissolved and only some of the mourners and the *dom* will watch over the pyre until it has burnt down to ashes.

As soon as the funeral party breaks up, the *granthi* washes his hands, feet and mouth in the river and then finds a quiet spot at the cremation ground where he recites the hymn *Kirtan Sohila*. At the request of the mourners he may perform *Japji Sahib*, and, if the cremation occurs at sunset, also the evening prayer *Rahiras Sahib*. After the texts are completed the *granthi* reads an *Ardas*, in which he presents the compositions recited as offerings. The mourners do not always participate in the reading, but fully entrust the *granthi* with the duty. In either case, his performance of *Kirtan Sohila* is considered paramount for a successful completion of a cremation.

The above description may give the impression that rituals at the cremation ground are performed with fixity and under somewhat harmonious conditions between the interacting parties. This is not always the case. Cremation is a ritual domain controlled and protected by Hindu funeral priests. Sikh mourners and the *gran-*

*thi* are only temporary visitors, who sometimes improvise the ritual procedures under guidance of elderly relatives and the *dom*, only to be reproved by the Hindu priests. During one ceremony the funeral priest told the mourners to dispose of the garlands from the bier by shouting: "Put them in Ganga ji or give them to the cows." One of the Sikh men therefore went up to a cow standing beside the pyre and decoratively hung two garlands over the cow's horn, whereupon the funeral priest rebuked, since the flowers should be placed on the ground before the cow as an offering. Another funeral priest demonstratively ignored the *granthi*'s performance of *Ardas* by repeating mantras aloud at the same time. On another occasion the *dom* supervised the young chief mourner all through the ceremony, by telling him where to place the *ghi* on the corpse, how many times he should circumambulate the pyre, and so on. Recurrently the funeral attendant checked if the mourner had completed the acts he prescribed. The young man followed all instructions but could not speak as he was unrestrainedly weeping throughout the ceremony. Instead an elderly relative replied to the *dom* and encouraged the boy by giving comments like "well done" and "it's a pity that you must experience this at such a young age".

A current issue of debate is the presence of women at the cremation ground. More sweepingly scholars have asserted that Sikh women do not participate in the ceremony nearby the pyre or are forbidden to do so.<sup>630</sup> As Parry (1994) notes, women from Punjabi communities may be present at cremations, even if "they sit apart from the men and away from the pyre, weeping and playing no part in the practical arrangements or ritual proceedings."<sup>631</sup> Many of my female Sikh informants, but far from all, claim they had at some point taken part in the cremation ceremonies and strongly denied their exclusion from this field. Nowadays there are no rules preventing women from participation, even if the accomplishment of a cremation remains anchored in the performance of a male chief mourner. In his sociological analysis of Sikh funerals, Kalsi (1994) claims that rituals are instrumental for the transmission of social values and the maintenance of power relations between men and women in the Sikh social structure. In his analysis these rituals confirm a continued subordination of women and stigmatization of widows.<sup>634</sup>

When local Sikhs are explaining the maintenance of traditional gender roles in the cremation ceremony they often recourse to discourses on the enduring influence of the Hindu majority society. Cremations in Varanasi remain ultimately a Hindu ceremony which has been overlaid with a few Sikh acts. The reading of *Ardas* around the pyre and the recitation of *gurbani* hymns are perceived to be the essential Sikh acts which could be carried out by women, but since cremations are under the control of Hindu priests they must comply with customs that do not encourage active female participation. Far from all Sikhs, however, consider it to be proper for women to enter the cremation ground and sometimes find justification for their exclusion in socially constructed conceptions of women as the emotionally weaker sex. A middle-aged

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<sup>630</sup> See McLeod 1997, Kalsi 1996.

<sup>631</sup> Parry 1994: 155.

Sikh woman said: "We used to ask our fathers why women couldn't go to the cremation ground. My father explained that men have much more control, they are stronger. If you can't control yourself it could create trouble over there." Weeping, she was told, is a sign of weakness that is improper at the cremation ground. Her husband, who overheard the conversation, added: "It is not that men are less close to their respected mothers, they are in the same grief as women, but they can control themselves. Women are more emotional." Responsible for the household, women highlight their functions and duties performed in the house after the corpse has left, such as the cleaning of the house and *Sukhmani Sahib* recitations.

#### IMMERSING THE "FLOWERS"

When the pyre has burnt down the remaining ashes and bones of the cremated body, the "flowers" (*phul*), are collected in a ceremony referred to as *Chautha*, "the fourth" day after cremation.<sup>632</sup> On this day the chief mourner picks up the bones from the cremation place, washes them in milk, ties them in white cloth and consigns them to a river. With the later Sikh Gurus the custom of immersing the remaining bones of a cremated body became associated with the village Kiratpur close by the river Sutlej in Punjab. Guru Hargobind built this village on the plains bordering the Shivalik hills and at the time of his death his body was cremated and the bones consigned to the Sutlej. It is likely that the remains of the next two Gurus, Har Rai and Har Krishan, were similarly immersed at Kiratpur. Today Sikhs in the Punjab and elsewhere bring the bones of deceased family members to the watercourse at Kiratpur.

My Sikh informants in Varanasi were acquainted with the custom of bringing "flowers" to Kiratpur, but for most it is a more convenient choice to immerse the bones in Ganga. Due to the constant stream of cremations in Varanasi the *Chautha* ceremony is often simplified: the chief mourners will collect bones immediately after cremation or just wash the remains into the river Ganga on the same day when the body has burnt down. Afterwards the mourners leave to pay a visit to the gurdwara where they arrange an *Ardas* and receive blessed food.

Drawing a parallel to the immersion of images of deities and sacred books, Parry suggests that Ganga operates as an "agent of desacrilisation" by neutralizing sacred things, even persons.<sup>633</sup> Most often the Sikhs I spoke to did not, however, attach any religious importance to a particular river, but said the ceremony could be done at any watercourse. Those who did specify a locality of immersion held it to be an act of reverence to comply with the last will of the deceased. When the mother of a wealthier Sikh family died, for instance, her "flowers" were taken to Allahabad under the escort of five cars to be immersed in the confluence (*prayag*) of the rivers Yamuna and Ganga. Social status is often a motivating factor in choosing a religious pilgrim-

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<sup>632</sup> The ceremony is also referred to as *phul chugna*, "collecting the bones".

<sup>633</sup> Parry 1994: 188.

age centre for immersion, and the use of modern transportations makes these more exceptional actions feasible.

The oft-stated reason as to why the “flower” should be guarded is to make sure that the body is fully burnt down to ashes and to protect the remains from disrespectful conducts. An elderly man said:

There is no religious significance to it... as if we would carry out rituals for the life after. If the dead relative was my father I took care of him when he was alive. But other people’s feet should not touch his bones. Therefore we immerse them in a river. It is not for peace or anything like that.

Popular beliefs in magic (*jadutona*) sometimes fringe the discussions on possible misuse. The burning ground is believed to attract tantrics who collect the ashes and thereby imprison the soul of the deceased in a ghostly existence. The ashes are later mixed with edible and drinkable substances to harm living beings with spirit affliction. The brisk business of cremations at Varanasi also makes many suspicious of the handling of dead bodies. A man who had just performed the last ritual for this mother said:

They do not let it [the body] get fully burnt before they throw it in Ganga. It is like an abuse of dead bodies. You can see corpses of dead people floating in Ganga. Therefore we decided to stay until the body was burnt down and washed away the ashes and bones in the river.

Most Sikhs think the ashes and bones of a deceased family member should be treated respectfully, even if just washed away. To dissolve the remnants of a family member in water is the means to express reverence.

#### THE LAST PRAYER

Sikh post-cremation ceremonies may be plentiful and, like the previous rituals mentioned so far in this chapter, assume different shapes depending upon family and caste traditions. The present code of conduct clearly prescribes that Sikhs are not to observe *shraddh*, the offerings to ancestors which are customary in the Hindu tradition. The traditional *shraddh* ceremonies generally consist of a set of offerings of gifts, particularly a large number of rice balls (*pind dan*) and the feeding of Brahmins, all of which aims to convert the liminal spirit of the deceased to an ancestor and assist its one-year long and difficult journey to the abode of the ancestors.<sup>634</sup> Many Sikhs I spoke with marked out that the offerings of rice balls are typical post-cremation observances among the Hindus and not the Sikhs, and expressed somewhat divergent beliefs related to the soul’s destiny after death. They would instead arrange an *Ak-*

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<sup>634</sup> Parry 1994: 191.



*hand path* of the Guru Granth Sahib after the cremation which, similar to *shraddh* ceremonies, had the function to overcome the mourning period and restore social order at the house. *Akhand path* was by some interlocutors interpreted as an enactment of good karma that would provide assistance to the soul on its journey to the divine court and make sure that it would not get caught in a betwixt-and-between state and create trouble for relatives left behind.

The forty-eight hour long *Akhand path* should preferably start on the eleventh day after death and be completed on the thirteenth, but it may just as well start on any odd numbered and auspicious date from the fifth day after death and onwards (i.e., day 5 – 7, 7 – 9, 9 – 11). If possible the mourning family usually tries to adjust the completion of the recitation (*bhog*) to a Sunday when shops are closed and most people are free from work. The time can be changed according to the convenience and should not interfere with major festivals or religious programs. When the *Akhand path* comes to an end all relatives and friends will be invited to the gurdwara in the afternoon to hear the pleasurable ending and take part in *Antim Ardas*, a last prayer for the deceased. By dressing up in white clothes, turbans and shawls, and participating in the program, the congregation expresses their condolences to the mourners. A couple of days beforehand the family send out invitation cards and put up an announcement about the last prayer on the blackboard in the gurdwara. According to the standard format of these notifications the name and the exact time of death of the deceased will mentioned along with information about the day and time for the conclusion of *Akhand path* and the last prayer “for the peace of her/his soul”. Only the closest male mourners undersign the announcement.

The two hour long program is usually arranged in the afternoon and consists of different parts. To begin with the mourning family brings death donations and offerings to the gurdwara which are placed before the Guru Granth Sahib. The traditional offerings (*dan*) in this context are food and newly purchased household goods, such as a bed, a mattress, blankets, kitchen utensils, clothes (sometimes also a wedding dress), and so on. These gifts are intended to represent articles which the departed soul would have used in life and are offered to the Guru to be used for the public kitchen and lodging in the gurdwara. The mourners will then place a framed photograph of the dead on the floor in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, so that when participants assemble and do *matha tekna* before the scripture they will also see the deceased. To create a religious atmosphere the *ragis* perform a special kind of devotional music called *Vairagi kirtan*. Literally *Vairagi* signifies a person with a feeling of deep longing for God and his or her mental state of being free and indifferent to all worldly desires and attachments.<sup>635</sup> In this context the compound implies the music which aims at supporting the mourners in their grief caused by separation and bereavement. At the end of the program the *granthi* performs the last Sikh prayer in which he pleads for peace and a good destiny for the departed soul.

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<sup>635</sup> McGregor 1997: 936.

When the service comes to an end all the mourners line up in male and female rows at the entrance of the gurdwara and community members express their sympathy by greeting and embracing the mourners. Afterwards all are invited to share a meal. In case the deceased died at an old age and had seen his or her grandchildren the food distributed will be considered as “good” and consist of fried bread (*puri*), vegetables and sweets. But if life was abruptly taken from a young person who had not completed his or her responsibilities the meal will be simpler with bread (*roti*) and vegetables to mark out death as an event of grief.



Death donations presented before Guru Granth Sahib at Gurubagh Gurdwara

Another and somewhat modern way to express sympathy in the death of a family member or friend is obituary notices. In the year 2002 when the president of the gurdwara committee, Ajit Singh Sabharwal, passed away, a local Hindi newspaper dedicated a supplement to his life and service to society. No less than twenty-one obituary notices, sponsored by the gurdwara committee and private businesses, covered the edition. While expressing condolences in statements like “We deeply mourn the sad demise of our beloved, may his soul get a place at the feet of the Guru,” the companies used the notices to also advertise for cookies, ice cream, undergarments and other products. In Varanasi it is quite uncommon to find advertisements such as these with obituaries and whenever they occur it is usually in connection with the death of a renowned person.

#### FEEDING THE FIVE BELOVED

On the thirteenth day or the seventeenth day after death, as well on the anniversary day, the mourning family invites five people from the gurdwara to offer them food at the house. The Sikhs in Varanasi say they are “feeding the *panj pyare*”, or the five beloved of Khalsa. During this ceremony the five people representing the *panj pyare* will perform an *Ardas* in the name of the departed soul and partake in a meal with the family. The feeding of five people is at the request of the individual family and it is normally the responsibility of the gurdwara manager to put together a group of male Sikhs for the visit. The *granthi*, *sevadar*, *ragi* or any of the employees who are free at hand may be selected for the undertaking, as long as they are *Amritdhari* Sikhs. In most cases the *granthi* will accompany the visits as he considers it his duty to perform the *Ardas* for the family and collect donations for the gurdwara.

When the group of the “five beloved” reaches the house they may recite either the *mulmantra* in unison or take turns to recite the lines of a single hymn from the Guru Granth Sahib appropriate to the occasion. As a *granthi* informed, the hymn sung at the feeding occasion should concern the theme of death and create an atmosphere of thoughtfulness. Before the “five beloved” accept the food, the *granthi* performs *Ardas*. At the events I participated in, the five people would simply take a seat at the dining table and be served a vegetarian meal by the mother of the house, sometimes the favorite food of the deceased, followed by tea and sweets. Once they had eaten they washed their hands and the *granthi* performed yet another *Ardas* in which he mentioned the name of the mourning family, pleaded their welfare and success, and asked God to give them strength to continue with *seva*. During the prayer the mother of the house would offer a monetary donation to the gurdwara by putting money bills in between the closed palms of the *granthi*.

The “feeding the five beloved” can be conducted in connection with any major life event, including birth and marriage, but the ceremony has become intimately associated with death observances and ancestor worship.<sup>636</sup> As the *granthis* themselves observed, the contemporary practice bears strong resemblance to *brahman bhojan* – the concluding part of the Hindu *shraddh* ceremony on the thirteenth day after a death when the mourning family is feeding honorable guests or Brahmins.<sup>637</sup> The Hindu informants Parry interviewed in Varanasi conceived the feeding of Brahmins as a symbolic act of digesting the temporary body of a dead person’s *preta* (which is created by the preceding ceremony of offering rice balls or *pind dan*) when it has reached the abode of the ancestors. The Hindu feeding custom marks the restoration of social order, which has been suspended during the period of mourning and

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<sup>636</sup> The custom of feeding five Sikhs can be traced back to the time after *Khalsa*. In *Nand Lal Rahit-nama*, a Sikh code of conduct of the early eighteenth century, Sikhs are encouraged to summon and feed five people in times of need and perform an *Ardas* in order to fulfil the wishes of the suppliant (McLeod 1987: 44). In this historical text the feeding of five people is not exclusively associated with funeral rites or death, but stands as a more general advice whenever the need arises.

<sup>637</sup> For the Hindu custom of *Brahman bhojan*, see Parry 1983: 206 – 7, Gold 1988: 97 – 99. The textual references to the Hindu ceremony are given by Shastri 1963: 185ff.

death pollution.<sup>638</sup> Among the Sikhs I did not find support for any similarly uniform symbolic interpretation of the practice of feeding *panj pyare*, even if most connect the custom with ancestor worship. During *Pitra Paksh*, or the “Fortnight of Ancestors”, in the month of *Ashvina* (September/October) many Sikhs who have lost a family member during the past year invite five Singhs to perform a prayer and feast in the name of the deceased. Cognizant of that the ceremony is modeled after a Hindu rite lay-people still considered it a Sikh rather than Hindu practice, as they invite five *Amritdhari* Sikhs to read the *Ardas*. Since the feeding of the five is not sanctioned by the Sikh code of conduct, employees and advocates of normative practices in the gurdwara are more critical to the practice, even if they are paradoxically the ones invited and responsible for its enactment. On one instance, when a party of five Singhs was put together at Gurubagh Gurdwara for an invitation to a mourning family, the head *granthi* reflected:

We do not have any *maryada* to support this, but it is similar to *terahvam* [offerings on the 13<sup>th</sup>]. It says in *gurbani* that you should serve your parents when they are alive and not when they are dead, and by doing *shraddh* you will not obtain any advantages. There is no meaning in inviting people for food. They who invite believe in *sanatan dharm* and we live in this society, therefore we do it. We are surrounded by other people, and if we would go against this, if people cannot invite us, they will say, “then who should we invite?”

Knowing that the practice is not sanctioned by the broader Sikh tradition the *granthis* may depict the feeding of five as a social custom they do perform to satisfy the wishes of the congregation. To counteract the contradiction between normative standards and the lived practice they may also re-cast the offering as a form of *seva* which the mourning family performs in the name of the deceased. When I consulted another *granthi* on this matter he said:

It is their devotion. They think that our feet came into the house. If I will invite five people to my house for *seva*, it is like inviting Brahmins for food. They want to do *seva* of *sevadars* as much as they can... that is *seva* of the Guru’s house. To give bread (*roti*), to help other people, and to do this *seva* generates good karma.

Feeding the *panj pyare* as a *shraddh* ceremony for the destiny of a departed soul or ancestor through the mediation of human agents in authoritative positions should not be a valid reason to the *granthis*, even if this may indeed motivate an invitation from an individual family. But to serve representatives of the Guru’s house in commemo-

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<sup>638</sup> Parry 1983: 206 – 7.

ration of a deceased person justifies the custom and thus provides the practice with new meanings.

#### ANCESTORS IN MEMORY

During the weeks, months and years to come the family will continue to honor the dead through additional offerings and recitations of the Guru Granth Sahib. Some Khatri families in Varanasi observe *satarvan*, or the seventeenth day after death, when they donate food, fruits and money in the gurdwara according to status and means. One female interlocutor specified the food offering on this day to consist of four fried breads (*puri*) on seventeen plates and a basket of fruits, although she did not know the reasons of the custom, more than it must have something to do with the number of days following a death. Another Sikh woman of Khatri caste said her family observed this offering in the time of her grandfathers but it has more or less run out of fashion. Instead her family preferred to do *seva* by distributing large quantities of food and blankets outside the community to poor and homeless people in the city. Other interlocutors maintained the importance of offering food in the name of the dead. One month and six months after a death, for instance, the family should bring dry food, such as flour, rice and sugar, as offering to the gurdwara or simply give a monetary donation for these articles.

Irrespective of the notional standpoints the individual or the family may have with regard to death pollution and mourning periods, most families will not plan or arrange a marriage, or celebrate any joyous event before an additional unbroken recitation of Guru Granth Sahib has been arranged and completed. In general this recitation is scheduled between the third and the sixth month following the death, either at the family house or in the gurdwara. The completion of it is generally believed to accomplish the transition from times of “sadness” (*dukh*) to “happiness” (*sukh*).

The anniversary of a death marks the conclusion of a year and again families may summon five people from the gurdwara to feed them and give donations to the communal kitchen for the departed family member. Another recitation of Guru Granth Sahib, sometimes called *Salana path* or “the annual reading”, should preferably be completed on the anniversary day and is by some perceived as the last ceremony for the deceased, who from now on will be considered an ancestor to commemorate. If the dead person was a close relative, the family will continue to complete a *Khulla path* or *Akhand path* on the death anniversary day, and arrange a reading of *Ardas* and sometimes serve food to the society in honor and memory of an ancestor.

## 4.2. FESTIVALS DURING THE TWELVE MONTHS

In the Guru Granth Sahib the passage of time and the ever renewing cycles of hours, days, months, seasons and years are recurrent themes. Time (*kal*) itself is considered a part of the creation of the eternal (*akal*) God and subordinated a divine order. "The fifteen lunar days, the seven days of a week, the months, seasons, days and nights, come over and over again; so the world goes on. The months, the days and the moments are auspicious for those upon whom the Lord casts His Glance of Grace." These words were penned by Guru Amardas who, like the other Sikh Gurus, saw nature as the general source for periodicity and order of time. The twenty-four hours alternating day and night is divided into eight watches;<sup>639</sup> a week is made up by seven days which have their own characteristics;<sup>640</sup> the waxing and waning of the moon generates fifteen day periods and altogether constitute twelve months with changing moods and yearnings in humans.<sup>641</sup> A period of two months creates a season in a cycle of six seasonal periods that join together in a year. In the Gurus' compositions the sense of time presents a natural cycle that was created by God and structures human life in harmony with a divine order.

The ways by which humans appreciate the pace of time are through the observance of calendric rituals or festivals. In the following I will pay attention to Sikh festivals which lead the congregation around a cyclic year and heightens the significance of certain dates and seasons. I will also describe a few festivals that are not necessarily considered to be a part of the Sikh tradition but which Sikh individuals and families observe as members of a broader North Indian culture.

## THE SIKH ALMANAC

The calendar situation in India presents a complex picture since there are several regional and religious calendars used side by side. In 1957 the government of India introduced the Indian National Calendar which includes 365 days and 12 months with Sanskrit names. This calendar was a variant of the lunar-solar Saka calendar that is reckoned from the year 78 A.D. and begins with the new-moon day in month *Chaitra* (March/April). Another lunar-solar calendar widely used in northern India is the Vikrami era, which is said to be named after Maharaja Vikramaditya who ruled over Ujjain more than 2000 years ago. This calendar is calculated from 58 B.C. and begins with the month *Karttika* (October/November).<sup>642</sup> Beside these calendars some festivals, such as Christmas, Republic Day and other civil holidays are set after the

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<sup>639</sup> GGS: 76, 146, 375.

<sup>640</sup> GGS: 841.

<sup>641</sup> GGS: 838. See also Guru Nanak's hymn *Barah Maha* (Twelve Months) in *Rag Tukhari* on page 1107 in Guru Granth Sahib, and Guru Arjan's compositions with the same title in *Rag Majh* on page 133.

<sup>642</sup> To find a corresponding year in a Saka era for a year in the Common Era one subtracts 78 years of the Saka year. When converting dates of the Common Era to Vikrami dates one adds 57 years (or more correctly 56.7 years). Thus, April 2007 was according to the Saka era 1929 and according the Vikrami era 2064.

solar Gregorian calendar, while most religious festivals follow any of the indigenous lunar, solar or lunar-solar systems.

THE TWELVE MONTHS OF THE YEAR			
	<i>Punjabi</i>	<i>Hindi</i>	
March/April	Chet	Chaitra	Spring season
April/May	Vaisakh	Vaiskaha	
May/June	Jeth	Jyeshtha	Summer season
June/July	Har	Ashadha	
July/August	Savan	Shravana	Rainy season
August/September	Bhadon	Bhadrapada	
September/October	Asu	Ashvina	Autumn season
October/November	Katak	Karttika	
November/December	Maghar	Margashirsha	Cold season
December/January	Poh	Pausha	
January/February	Magh	Magha	Winter season
February/March	Phagan	Phalgun	

Figure 22.

By tradition the Sikh community has calculated and celebrated most religious events after the ancient lunar-solar Vikrami calendar. Whereas the festivals *Vaisakhi*, *Maghi*, and the martyrdoms of the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh (*Sahibzadas*) have been celebrated according to solar dates, other holidays and anniversaries of the Gurus have followed the pace of the moon. According to the lunar system of the Vikrami calendar there are 354/355 days and twelve months in a year. Each month starts the day after *puranmashi* – the full moon day – and consists of a fourteen-day period of the waning (dark) fortnight, followed by *masia* – the day of a new moon – and the waxing (bright) fortnight, and ends on the next full moon day. Each day within a lunar month is described and calculated by its position in the fortnight, such as “the first day of the waning fortnight in the month *Chet*” (*Chet vadi 1*), or “the fourth day of the waxing fortnight in the month *Chet*” (*Chet sudi 4*). Since the lunar calendar strictly follows the rhythm of the moon, the lunar year is eleven days shorter in relation to the solar system, and consequently one additional month (*mal mas*) of 30 days is added every second or third year.

On *puranmashi* many Sikh women in Varanasi used to observe fasts (*vrata*) of some sort (abstaining from salt or avoiding speech before the morning bath) and hold individual or collective *katha*, or telling of “stories”. Instead of the customary reading about various Hindu deities the women would enact stories about Guru Nanak from a book called *Puranmashi katha*. Other interlocutors said *puranmashi* was an auspicious day for offerings in the gurdwara and they used to serve food and *karah prashad* to the community and family members. The new-moon day, on the other hand, was only observed by a minority of interlocutors who said they arrange recitations of

*Sukhmani Sahib* and offered food and rice pudding (*khir*) to the congregation on this dark day of the month.

Parallel to the rythm of the moon runs the 12 months of the Vikrami solar year, which consist of 29 – 32 days each as the sun passes through the zodiac signs. The first day of a solar month called *sangrand* starts somewhere between day 12 and day 17 in a month according to the Gregorian calendar. The *sangrand* marks the astonomical event when the sun passes from one sign of the zodiac to the next and each first day of the month is therefore named after the sign of the zodiac whose beginning it marks.<sup>643</sup> Since the Vikrami solar year of 365/366 days is sidereal and about twenty minutes longer compared to a tropical solar year, the dates are slowly pushed forward by one day after 70 – 71 years.<sup>644</sup> The solar and lunar years of the Vikrami calendar consequently drift in two opposite directions: while the solar year slowly crawls forwards in time, the lunar moves backwards.

Among local Sikhs the day of *sangrand* is surrounded by beliefs and ritualized practices. Those who are born on this day are popularly believed to be lucky in life. The types of action people perform on the first day of the month is said to determine the remaining part of it. Therefore many Sikh families will dedicate the day to activities that are considered good: they start and end recitations from the *Guru Granth Sahib*; attend the gurdwara with donations and food offerings; listen to the composition *Barah Maha* and organize public distribution of food. The first day of the month *Magh*, which marks the winter solistice, is thought to be an especially good day for religious action. A middle-aged businessman said he had for seven years in a row completed an *Akhand path* on *Magh sangrand* in memory of his departed father. After having suffered severely by not having money for food, he promised God he would perform annual readings if the sales increased. The recitation with the *bhog* ceremony adjusted to *sangrand*, he claimed, had made him do extremely well in business.

To keep a check on the calendric systems and to know the correct days on which festivals should be celebrated is far from common knowledge. Instead people will take use of a so-called *jantri*, a small almanac booklet in which the lunar and solar dates as well as other miscellaneous information about festivals and auspicious dates are given. The SGPC and book publishers in the Punjab yearly issue these booklets under the name *Nanakshahi samat jantri*, literally “the calendar of the great Nanak era”, which are particularly intended for the Sikh community.<sup>645</sup> Besides mentioning the current year according to the Saka calendar and the Vikrami calendar and significant lunar and solar dates,<sup>646</sup> the almanac calculates time from two important events

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<sup>643</sup> For instance, the day when the sun leaves Sagittarius and enters Capricorn (*Makara*) in January will be called *Makar sangrand*.

<sup>644</sup> Editors of the Vikrami calendar use the so-called *Surya Siddhanta* length of a year, which consists of 356 days, 6 hours, 12 minutes and 36 seconds, as compared to the tropical year with 356 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 45 seconds.

<sup>645</sup> The SGPC nowadays publishes the yearly booklet on the Internet ([www.sgpc.net](http://www.sgpc.net)).

<sup>646</sup> A standard calendar usually mentions the full-moon day (*puranmashi*), new-moon day (*masia*), the first day of the solar month (*sangrand*), and fifth day (*panchmi*) of a month.



in the Sikh history: the birth of Guru Nanak in 1469 CE and the creation of Khalsa in 1699 CE. For example, in 2001 the year of the Nanakshahi era was 532 while the Khalsa era corresponded to year 302.

In more recent years Sikh institutions and communities have adopted a new version of the Nanakshahi calendar according to which most Sikh festivals are celebrated on fixed solar dates and not according to the dates of the bright and dark fortnights in the lunar calendar. In the 1990s both Sikhs in India and the Diaspora pleaded for a new calendar as the lunar months wander in seasons and would therefore create a lot of ambiguity in the Sikh ritual life. For instance, the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh which occurred on day 7 in the bright fortnight in the month of *Poh* (*sudi 7 Poh*) in the year 1723 (1666 CE) according to the lunar Vikrami calendar and on day 23 (23 *Poh*) in the solar system of the same calendar would sometimes occur twice in a year and some years not at all if the lunar dates were to be followed. Monthly festivals related to specific seasons would be slowly pushed forward in time and thus disturb the relationship between certain months and seasons which are described in the Guru Granth Sahib. As proponents of the new system argued, a new calendar based on a tropical solar year and not the lunar system would resolve many practical problems regarding exact dates of Sikh holidays and give the community its very own religious almanac.<sup>647</sup> A number of Sikh communities in the Diaspora adopted the new Nanakshahi almanac by the end of the 1990s and after due deliberation the SGPC implemented the calendric system during the *Vaisakhi* celebrations in 2003.<sup>648</sup> Except for the anniversary day of Guru Nanak, which continues to be celebrated according to the lunar system on the full moon day in the month Katak, all other Sikh *Gurpurubs* are thus fixed to solar dates in the new Nanakshahi calendar. The new year begins on the first day of the month *Chet* (corresponding to March 14) in accordance with the compositions *Barah Maha* – the Gurus' descriptions of the twelve months in a year.

But the new Sikh almanac has not gained support from all Sikh communities in India. Two of the major pilgrimage centers outside the state of Punjab and beyond the religious jurisdiction of SGPC – Patna Sahib and Hazoor Sahib – still continue to celebrate *gurpurubs* according to the Vikrami calendar.<sup>649</sup> The local community in Varanasi, which by tradition complies with decrees issued at Patna Sahib, has also not implemented the new solar system. Thus, when I re-visited India in January 2004, Guru Gobind Singh's birthday was commemorated in the Punjab on the fixed date of January 5, while Sikhs in Varanasi and Bihar observed the festival on January 16 in consistency with the ancient system. Conscious of the dissention the use of two calendars may create within the broader Sikh community, a local *granthi* in Varanasi emphatically maintained that the new Nanakshahi calendar should not be imple-

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<sup>647</sup> *The Tribune*, 2003-03-09.

<sup>648</sup> *The Tribune*, 2003-04-13. Already in 1999 the then president of SGPC, Bibi Jagir Kaur, made an unsuccessful attempt to put the new Nanakshahi calendar into practice. She was excommunicated from the Sikh panth for doing this without consensus or directives from the *Akal Takht*.

<sup>649</sup> *The Tribune*, 2005-01-05.

mented since it violates both the original Vikrami dates of the births and deaths of the Sikh Gurus and the lunar calendar which the Gurus observed and used. In public discourses, opponents of a fixed almanac have put forward similar arguments and expressed fear that the new solar system will entail a Westernization of ancient Indian conceptions and divisions of time. Maintaining the lunar Vikrami calendar or introducing the new solar Nanakshahi calendar has thus become a matter of preserving traditions or modernizing the community to a global world. It only remains to see how local Sikh congregations outside the Punjab will handle this issue in the future.

### CLASSIFICATIONS OF FESTIVALS

Any study of festivals in the Indian culture will have to struggle with the problem of magnitude. The popular saying in Varanasi “There are seven days and nine festivals in Kashi” may appear as a grave exaggeration, but there seems to be a variety of local, regional or national religious or cultural festivals occurring every week of the year. Anthropologists studying the various Hindu traditions and localities have over the years produced various classification schemes of indigenous festivals. While some have merely organized a large proportion of festivals into smaller units, others have systematically presented seasonal and commemorative events to demonstrate underlying theories about emanation of supernatural power or paid attention to the relationship between festivals and social power structures in the society studied.<sup>650</sup>

In a study on festivals in the Punjab, Walia (2002) observes that it is almost impossible to determine the exact number of celebrations, considering that no less than 7000 fairs and festivals were observed in pre-partition times and more than 2000 fairs are celebrated in the present Punjab, mostly in rural areas.<sup>651</sup> Notwithstanding the hardship to document all Punjabi festivals, Walia classifies the fairs of Punjab into six main types: seasonal fairs (like *Vaisakhi*, *Basant*); fairs which are based on mythical legends; fairs held in honour of saints; fairs to honour historical events; fairs related to festivals (such as *Divali* and *Dassehra*); and sports fairs.<sup>652</sup> Furthermore, Walia subdivided these different events into local, regional and national fairs and festivals. Whereas local fairs are celebrations of local folklore, *pirs*, heroes and variations of regional or national legends by villagers or smaller groups of people, regional fairs are usually supported by authorities and are publicly shared by a larger segment of the Punjabi population. National fairs are holidays that are officially recognized as all-Indian events, such as *Divali*, *Holi* and *Vaisakhi*. Some festivals in this category (like *Ramnaumi* and *Id*) are celebrated by a single religious community, but will still attract people from other religions.<sup>653</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> For an overview of different classifications and related theories, see Freed & Freed 1998: 31 – 34.

<sup>651</sup> Walia 2002: 12. A local Punjabi calendar (*jantri*) with dates and the horoscope for the year 2005 mentioned 201 festivals and fairs to be observed during the year.

<sup>652</sup> Walia 2002: 14.

<sup>653</sup> Walia 2002: 41 ff.

The *Nanakshahi samat jantri* which is published yearly by the SGPC at Amritsar distinguishes between four main categories of festivals: the first and far most important type is the *gurpurubs*, or religious functions which commemorate the births (*prakash divas*) and deaths (*joti jot samae*) of all ten Sikh Gurus, their accession to the office of the Guru (*gurgaddi*), as well as the completion and installation day of the Guru Granth Sahib in 1604. In total there are thirty-four *gurpurubs* in the present Sikh calendar which annually attract large segments of the community into action (See Appendix 1). The second category is "historical festival days" (*itihesak dihari*) which encompasses a large number of new and old celebrations that commemorates historical events held memorable by the larger Sikh community. Birthdays and martyrdoms of family members to the Gurus and devout Sikhs, foundation days of Sikh institutions, and days to remember devastating attacks on the Sikh community may be included in this category. The third group of festivals under the heading "official holidays" (*sarkar chuttian*) signifies religious and national events mentioned in the calendar of India, like Christmas, Republic Day, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, and so on. Lastly there are "other festivals" (*te hor tiohar*), which refer to local and regional fairs and festivals in the Punjab. The classification and order of ranking reflects that *gurpurubs* and "historical festival days" are the important celebrations of the Sikhs, whereas official holidays and other festivals are observed by the Sikhs as they are members of the civil society and a Punjabi culture. My Sikh friends in Varanasi made a similar distinction between the Sikh *gurpurubs* and other cultural events which they share with their Hindu and Muslim neighbors.

In the semi-structured interviews my Sikh interlocutors were asked to state the festivals they themselves observed. All mentioned the birthday of Guru Nanak on the full-moon day of *Katak* (November) and that of Guru Gobind Singh in the month of *Poh* (January) as exclusive Sikh festivals they celebrated with great enthusiasm. The martyrdoms of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were perceived as equally significant *gurpurubs* in the Sikh calendar, even if only half as many stated they actually used to do anything special on these anniversaries.

The popular story in connection with Guru Arjan's martyrdom tells about the Guru's arrest by the Moguls and how he was taken from Goindwal to Lahore to be subjected to a horrible torture. He was made to sit on red-hot iron pans and to take a dip in boiling water. Burning sand was poured over his blistered body. After days of physical torments he peacefully passed away in 1606 CE. To commemorate the sacrifice of the Guru the local congregation arranges so-called *chabil*, stands for free distribution of water and *kachi lassi* (milk mixed with water) to the public, at different places in the city. "They poured hot sand on Guru Arjan Dev so therefore we give *kachi lassi* and other cold things to give people coolness in the hot summer season," a Sikh woman explained the symbolic importance of doing *seva* on this day.

At Varanasi the anniversary of Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution in 1675 CE has become more or less subsumed by the preparations and festivities before Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in the following month. On the anniversary day Sikh musicians may choose to sing hymns composed by Guru Tegh Bahadur and retell the story

about his beheading by the Moguls in Delhi. Other *gurpurubs* during the twelve months are mentioned in the daily morning and evening liturgy and sometimes celebrated by recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib and extra musical programs. But it is primarily the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh that are staged with pomp and show in Varanasi.

It is noteworthy that the festival *Vaisakhi* was given comparatively little attention by my interlocutors in Varanasi. In the Punjab *Vaisakhi* occurs on the first day of the month *Vaisakh* and marks the ripening of the wheat harvest whereby people attend fairs and cultural programs with sports competitions, folk dances and songs. To

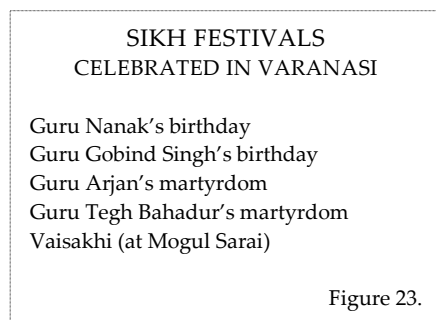


Figure 23.

farming villagers the festival has been an occasion to celebrate the fruits of labour. In the Sikh tradition *Vaisakhi* has gained special significance as a historical festival day since it was on this day Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa community at Anandpur in 1699. People visit gurdwaras at different places in the Punjab, especially the Sikh centres at Anandpur and Amritsar, for presenting donations and participating in worship activities. The reasons

why the Sikhs in Varanasi gave less attention to *Vaiksakhi* can be found partly in the urban life-style and partly in the local organization of the festival. Many calendric events which by tradition have been associated with the agricultural cycle lose their relevance in an urban setting. An elderly Sikh woman said: "*Vaisakhi* is celebrated a lot in the Punjab because of the crops. But we have stayed too long in Benares. We do not celebrate it any more." Since many years back the congregation at Varanasi has handed over the responsibility of *Vaisakhi* celebrations to the neighboring congregation at Mogul Sarai. Annually the *Grand Trunk Road Gurdwara* on the other side of river Ganga organizes a three day-long program with town processions (*Nagar kirtan*) and performances of music and *gurbani* expositions. In connection with the yearly festivity the congregation at Mogul Sarai arranges the *Khande di pahul* ceremony for all who wish to take *amrit* and adopt the Khalsa discipline. Although the gurdwara committee provides transport services to attract devotees from neighboring congregations, the urban Sikhs still give *Vaisakhi* less notice in comparison to the festivals they themselves organize in the city.

Many of my informants perceived *gurpurubs* as days to venerate the Gurus. "We commemorate the sacrifices they have made for us and India," as a male interlocutor said. The festival days provided occasions for religious worship and teaching others, especially their own children about the Guru's births and deeds. My interlocutors also separated the Sikh *gurpurubs* from other types of festivals that do not originate from the Sikh tradition but which can be collected under the term "cultural festivals". This grouping encompasses a large number of regional and national Hindu festivals connected with the changes of seasons and mythologies and worship of a

particular deity or deities in the Hindu pantheon. The responses indicate that local Sikhs do participate in a wide range of festivals in the national Indian calendar, as well as the regional Hindu calendar, even if their attribution of religious significance varies considerably between families and individuals. A young Sikh woman, for instance, did not see any religious difference between the Sikh and Hindu festivals but described all of them as various *puja* or “worship”-events of a supernatural power. “On *Vasant Panchami* we do *puja* of Saraswati. During the *Vishukarma puja* we do worship of Vishukarma. On *Holi* mother Holika will be worshiped and on *gurpurubs* we worship the Sikh Gurus,” she said. A male Sikh in the same age category would instead distinguish between *gurpurubs*, which are religious events “for the soul”, and other seasonal festivals “like *Holi* and *Divali* [which] are for fun”. Interlocutors of an older age tended to pay more attention to the social functions of celebrating non-Sikh festivals in a culture and society shared with Hindus and Muslims neighbors. An elderly Sikh man simply said: “We are all Indians and live in society so we participate in different festivals and share the happiness with others.” In the following I will exemplify the two categories of Sikh and cultural festivals by describing the ways by which the local congregation collectively celebrates the birthdays of the first and the last Guru and how individual Sikh families may observe an all-Indian festival like *Divali*.

#### CELEBRATING THE GURUS

Two major religious events held during the twelve months are the celebration of Guru Nanak’s birth on the full-moon day of the month *Katak* and Guru Gobind Singh’s birthday in the month *Poh*. On these days people from all over the Varanasi district pour in to the city to socialize and enjoy themselves with families and friends. Dressed up in their best clothing they participate in devotional singing of *gurbani*, listen to *katha* performances, and perform *seva* by preparing food, storing shoes, or simply donating money to the Guru’s house. Any ethnographic description of these festivals will fall short in comparison to real experiences of the cheerful and colorful events. In Varanasi the gurdwara buildings are decorated in gleaming neon lights the days before the celebration. The throne of the Guru Granth Sahib is virtually wrapped in new clothes, draperies and garlands of french marigolds and the air around it is scented with sweet perfume.

## THE EXTERNAL STRUCTURE OF GURPURUB CELEBRATIONS

### EVENTS PRIOR TO THE GURU'S BIRTHDAY

1. Morning processions 40 days before (*Prabhatferi*)
2. Unbroken recitations of Guru Granth Sahib 40 days before (*Akhand path*)
3. City procession 1 day to 1 week before (*Nagar kirtan*)
4. Changing the cloth of *Nishan Sahib* 1 day before at 7 am. (*Nishan Sahib seva*)
5. Devotional music one evening before at 7 – 9 pm. (*kirtan darbar*)

### EVENTS ON THE DAY OF THE GURU'S BIRTHDAY

1. Procession and installation of the scripture at 4 am.
2. Devotional music and expositions of gurbani from 7.30 am to 1 pm.
3. Public distribution of food from 11 am. (*Guru ka langar*)
4. Devotional music from 7 pm to 1 am.
5. The celebration of the Guru's birth at 1 am (*Prakash Utsav*)

Figure 24.

The *gurpurub* celebration of the birthdays of the first and the last Guru are not single rituals per se, but incorporate a set of events and activities that extend over several weeks (See Figure 24). In the social and religious life of the Sikhs various types of processions have been a traditional means to honor community members and collectively celebrate a fortuitous event that has happened or is about to occur.<sup>654</sup> In general one can distinguish between three types of religious processions observed in the local community: firstly, there are processions which do not involve the physical presence of Guru Granth Sahib but are solely constituted by Sikh devotees. A festive event in this category is the morning procession called *prabhatferi*, or “to go around in the early morning”, which is organized daily for forty days prior to anniversaries commemorating the Sikh Gurus. Before dawn troops of devotees will gather in their respective neighborhoods and march to the Sikh temple while singing devotional hymns. Secondly, there are collective processions organized during festivals in which the Guru Granth Sahib plays a central role. Perhaps the most spectacular form of procession in this category is *Nagar kirtan*,<sup>655</sup> or “town praising”, which is staged as

<sup>654</sup> A common noun for “procession” and “cortège” in the Punjabi language is the Arabic loan-word *jalus*, which in the original meaning signifies the act of sitting on the throne and the first year of reign reckoned from the date of the coronation of an emperor (Nayeem 1980). However Sikhs rarely use the term *jalus* for religious processions since it bears negative connotations in collegial speech. The noun verb *jalus kadhna*, literally “to take out procession”, signifies an act of causing disrepute. In the traditional Punjabi village a person who has “blackened” his face and been deemed guilty of dishonourable deeds would be taken out in a procession called *jalus* to be publicly humiliated. Instead people will specify the particular name for the procession intended, depending upon which type of collective movement is performed during which ceremony.

<sup>655</sup> Occasionally the event is referred to as “the auspicious journey” (*shubh yatra*).

a main attraction on anniversary days of the first and the last Guru.<sup>656</sup> For a whole day a large number of devotees take Guru Granth Sahib out in procession and traverse various neighborhoods of the city, singing *gurbani* and displaying communal activities. The eye-catching parade permits important symbolic elements of the community to be seen and worshipped, and has become a popular way of creating public awareness of the Sikh religion. Thirdly, there are processions of the Guru Granth Sahib which aims solely to honor the scripture and the historical Gurus by displaying the book as royalty in smaller parades. On the Gurus' birthdays the congregation in Varanasi meets in the early morning hours to mount the scripture on a palanquin and slowly circulate the gurdwara before the *Prakash* ceremony. People perfume the way for the Guru and throw flowers on the throne when the book is solemnly opened. Afterwards the gurdwara arranges a full-day program with a large-scaled distribution of food and performances of music and expositions. At night the congregation gathers to celebrate the auspicious conclusion of the unbroken readings of Guru Granth Sahib and praise the birth of the Guru by throwing flowers over the scripture.

#### MORNING PROCESSIONS

Forty days before the anniversary of Guru Nanak's and Guru Gobind Singh's birthday the Sikhs in Varanasi organize daily morning programs of devotional singing called *prabhatferi*. The term *prabhatferi* is a compound of the words "morning" (*prabhat*) and "to go around" (*feri*), and thus means "to go around in the early morning". In this context it signifies groups of people who before sunset set out in processions from different locations in Varanasi to sing *gurbani* hymns. These marches are usually one-way routes and the final destination is the gurdwara associated with the Guru who is subject of the commemoration: before Guru Nanak's birthday the Sikhs march to Gurubagh Gurdwara and in relation to Gobind Singh's anniversary to Nichibagh Gurdwara. During the time of my fieldwork regular *prabhatferi* groups were organized from five locations in the city: Ashok Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Gandhi Nagar, and the distant northern areas of Raj Ghat and Cotton Mill. In addition there was one group walking between the two gurdwaras, from Nichibagh to Gurubagh and vice versa. Although Sikhs may express the most divergent motives for participating in these processions, many will take a vow to regularly, for forty days, get up early in the morning, take a bath, and walk to the gurdwara, sometimes barefoot, while singing *gurbani* hymns. The commitment to regularity is believed to generate religious merits and divine favours. At the collective level the staging of *prabhatferis* is a means to venerate the Guru whom is to be celebrated.

The procession starts at 5 in the morning at the specific locality and reaches the gurdwara one or sometimes two hours later. One person will lead the procession, carrying a *Nishan Sahib* with flower-garlands wrapped around the staff. This under-

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<sup>656</sup> Other communities may arrange *Nagar Kirtan* on all the major Gurpurubs as well as Vaisakhi, i.e. all the major festivals in the Nanakshahi calendar.

taking is considered to be a type of *seva* that attracts both Sikhs and Hindus. In the *prabhatferis* I participated in, Sikh and Hindu men used to share the responsibility of carrying the standard. Some families have established a tradition of choosing more permanent standard-bearers for the procession of their neighborhood. In more elaborated *prabhatferis* the congregation may bring out a framed poster of the venerated Guru that is placed on a palanquin, adorned with flowers and neon lights, to be transported on a rickshaw. The lines of the walking collective do not follow any fixed order, although by habit men usually walk in the front, playing instruments (*dolki* and *chimta*), followed by women and children – the smallest ones carried in the arms of their mothers. In *prabhatferi* people of all ages may take part and join in and depart along the routes as they like. The husband may give his wife and children a lift on the scooter and drop them at some given point where the *prabhatferi* is passing by. Quite often the march starts out with a smaller group of people and doubles or trebles its size before reaching the gurdwara.

A procession taken out from Nichibagh Gurdwara in 2000 may serve as an example of how these processions, as religious performances, are framed by a formalized opening and a cathartic end. At about 5 am all participants were sitting in rows in the courtyard for a mini-*langar* with tea and biscuits. A portable *Nishan Sahib* was taken out from the gurdwara. After ten to fifteen minutes all participants stood up, men and women in two separate lines facing each other. Accompanied by musical instruments they were jointly singing the words “Satnam, Vahiguru” for a couple of minutes. The chanting was interrupted when one participant cried out “Jo bole so nihal”, whereupon all replied “Sat Sri Akal” and reverentially bowed towards the *Nishan Sahib*. “They take the blessing from the Guru,” the observing granthi commented. Led by the standard, people began the walk in the drowsy streets, while loudly singing *Chaupai Sahib* to the rhythm of the instruments. I was told that morning processions should always start with this composition and the singing would signal the beginning of the walk. When the troop was approaching the gurdwara one hour later the singing intensified both in terms of sound and pace. Outside the main entrance of the gurdwara all participants gathered around *Nishan Sahib* and begun to sing a song in praise of the ten Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib and the Khalsa community. At the end of the last verse everyone saluted each other and in a final gesture cried out the Sikh *jaikara* in unison, followed by a concluding exclamation of the Khalsa ovation. Along a similar pattern one *prabhatferi* after another was concluded during the morning hours. The participants then entered the gurdwara and afterwards were served tea and consecrated food (*prashad*).

The hymn which the group chooses to sing in *prabhatferis* is generally a matter of individual preference: one or two persons simply pick out a hymn they like and know how to perform well. Some of the local *prabhatferi* groups divided the forty-day period into three parts of 10 to 15 days each. Within these separate time units they would select *gurbani* verses whose form and content invoked specific themes appropriate for the occasion. For example, during the first fortnight they would sing hymns which were written as supplications, the following ten days verses that touched upon



the practice of *simran* and during the last days only sing hymns that were composed by the celebrated Guru. In case another Sikh festival or *gurpurub* occurs within the forty-day period, the groups will dedicate one *prabhatferi* to hymns associated with the theme of that day. When, for instance, the martyrdom day of Guru Tegh Bahadur coincides with *prabhatferis* before Guru Gobind Singh's anniversary the groups are likely to sing *gurbani* verses about the sufferings and sacrifices of martyrs (*shahidi shabads*). But the selection of texts may also be made on the criteria of individual taste. A middle-aged Sikh woman said she would pick one daily hymn from Guru Granth Sahib to be sung the following morning. In the daytime she practised the hymn and wrote it down in a diary she kept in a special "*prabhatferi bag*". The decisive factor for her selection of *gurbani* verses was variation: "It does not sound good to use the same hymn (*shabad*) everyday but one should bring new ones," she said. To accomplish variation many participants keep small diaries with *gurbani* verses to read from during the walk. A young Sikh man showed me how he had over the years noted down *gurbani* verses he liked in two small books that were filled with page references to Guru Granth Sahib.

According to a general rule for *prabhatferis* in Varanasi the first two hymns to be sung should be selected and led by women and the next two hymns by men. The singing starts by bringing out the refrain of the hymn which will be repeated throughout the singing.<sup>657</sup> The refrain works as a recognition signal to identify the particular hymn chosen: when one person starts singing the line, other participants recognize which hymn is being invoked and can join in. The musical components used are mainly folk tunes that are learnt through practise – by listening and memorizing melodies and rhythms that may evoke suitable moods for the occasion and hymn being sung. When changing between two hymns and melodies the participants always cry out the Sikh *jaikara* as a marker to frame the alternation.

Another prominent feature of morning processions to be mentioned is the undertaking of *seva* for the *prabhatferi* groups. To offer the *gurbani*-singing assembly snacks, sweets and tea is held to be meritorious acts. Community members will therefore invite the group to their house before the walk sets out or organize small "*seva-stations*" along the route. In 1999, for instance, a renowned Sikh family in Varanasi set up a station on the spot of a small Shiva-linga shrine not far from Gurubagh Gurdwara. The family placed a garlanded picture of Guru Nanak on top of the shrine and generously distributed tea and sweets to all participants. For an hour in the morning the *prabhatferi* troop temporarily took over a place held sacred by the Hindus and converted it into a space of the Sikhs.

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<sup>657</sup> When choosing refrains participants will follow the guidelines in *Amrit Kirtan*, a collection of indexed *gurbani* hymns. In this book one or two lines of each *gurbani* hymn are underlined to mark out the refrains.

#### CITY PROCESSIONS

On the Sunday prior to Guru Nanak's birthday the playground of *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* is noisy and crammed with people of all ages. School children, dressed up in well-ironed uniforms, are standing in lines chatting, sounding trumpets, and waving banners. Girls from a local association for Sikh *kirtan* are making the finishing touches to placards carrying messages like "The whole world is happy to receive the divine name". Small boys wearing royal-blue battle dresses and saffron-colored turbans are lined up, holding shorter swords in upright positions. At the centre of everyone's attention is a lorry, adorned with marigolds in ornamental patterns, which holds a palanquin with robes and cushions at the front of the float. Close to 1 pm the *granthi* enters the schoolyard carrying the Sikh scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*, on his head under armed escort of five senior men. All of them are repeatedly chanting the divine name (*Satnam Vahiguru*), while another person is waving a whisk over the book. The *granthi* ascends the float, arranges cushions, and finally places the scripture on the bedecked seat. At this juncture he is exhorting all to exclaim the Sikh *jaikara*, whereupon the whole crowd of people – school children, teachers, men and women – are loudly replying *Sat Sri Akal*. Shortly thereafter, devotees and members of various Sikh organizations, band parties, and guards mounted on horse back start out on festive procession and for the rest of day winds its way slowly through the streets of Varanasi.

As a religious event of feasting, the procession called *Nagar kirtan*, literally "town praising" or "singing in town", is an occasion to celebrate a shared collective history and publicly express, to each other and outsiders, the commitment and adherence to basic religious values. On the Sunday before the anniversaries of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh the Sikhs in Varanasi will draw together all groups of devotees and jointly take out a mile-long procession through the main streets of the city to exhibit collective social and religious activities.<sup>658</sup> The most essential feature of *Nagar kirtan* is the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which temporarily leaves the sacred abode of the gurdwara to conduct a tour of the city for one day, attended and escorted by devotees. The scripture is installed on a palanquin mounted on a float that is usually transported by a large flamboyant trailer. In the early morning hours on the festival of celebration, young and old devotees will decorate the vehicle with roses and saffron-colored marigolds and establish a temporary throne for the *Guru Granth Sahib* with the customary canopy, embroidered robes, cushions and other ritual paraphernalia, intended to provide the scripture comfort and display the sovereignty of the text. As the procession continues after nightfall the vehicle is decorated with electric lights in festive colors and designs.

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<sup>658</sup> The choice of time is explained in pragmatic terms: on Sundays people are free from work and it is not practical to arrange the procession on the anniversary day.



Children representing the *panj pyare* in city procession

The factors determining the particular route of *Nagar kirtan* performances are often related to practical circumstances and the theme for which the event is organized. To achieve a high degree of public display local Sikhs generally choose a series of geographical locations that represent main centers in a city and areas in which a large population of devotees reside to create a meaningful structure of places.<sup>659</sup> The course of the route may be organized as a circular roundtrip with the gurdwara as the starting and finishing point and the collective movement enclosing a space in the geography, or is arranged like a one-way route between two or more sanctuaries that bear historical association to the particular Guru of celebration. During my fieldwork the local congregation arranged *Nagar kirtan* in connection with Guru Nanak's birthday along a circular route which started and ended at Gurubagh – the gurdwara associated with the first Guru – and passed through the central streets of Chet Ganj Road, Lahura Bir, Lajpat Nagar, Nanak Nagar, Shastri Nagar, and Sigra. Along a similar pattern the procession before the anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh started from Nichibagh Gurdwara and traversed through the busy streets of Chowk, Godoulia crossing, Shir Ganj, Lahurabir, and Maidagan before it returned to Nichibagh

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<sup>659</sup> Since large number of devotees will walk the whole stretch, *Nagar Kirtan* must be somewhat limited in terms of distance. Communities also need to be granted permission from local authorities for the route of procession.

about six hours later. As one *granthi* said, these stretches of the route were favoured when the community began to perform *Nagar kirtan* as a large number of the Sikhs and Sindhis live and work in these areas. The reversible character of the routes emphasizes the importance of the gurdwaras by starting and ending at the same place.

Temporarily the procession will manipulate public places already existing in the local geography to engender a meaningful space. Before the festival day, local Sikhs will decorate and mark out the road with bamboo gates wrapped in saffron-colored clothes and banderols carrying religious messages, such as "The greatness of Guru Nanak is manifested through all ages", or "Congratulations on the anniversary of Guru Nanak". Individual Sikh families and businessmen with houses and shops located along the stretch illuminate their buildings with electric lights to celebrate the arrival of the Guru-scripture and the congregation of Sikhs to their neighborhood. At selected points along the route they prepare "*seva*-stations" where devotees generously distribute sweets, snacks and tea to participants and spectators. Before the carriage arrives on the day of procession, Sikhs beating kettle drums and rows of marchers bearing banners announce the occasion. They are followed by groups of devotees who sweep and wash the streets with water and strew petals on the road. For observing spectators these acts clearly signal that a person of exalted status is approaching.

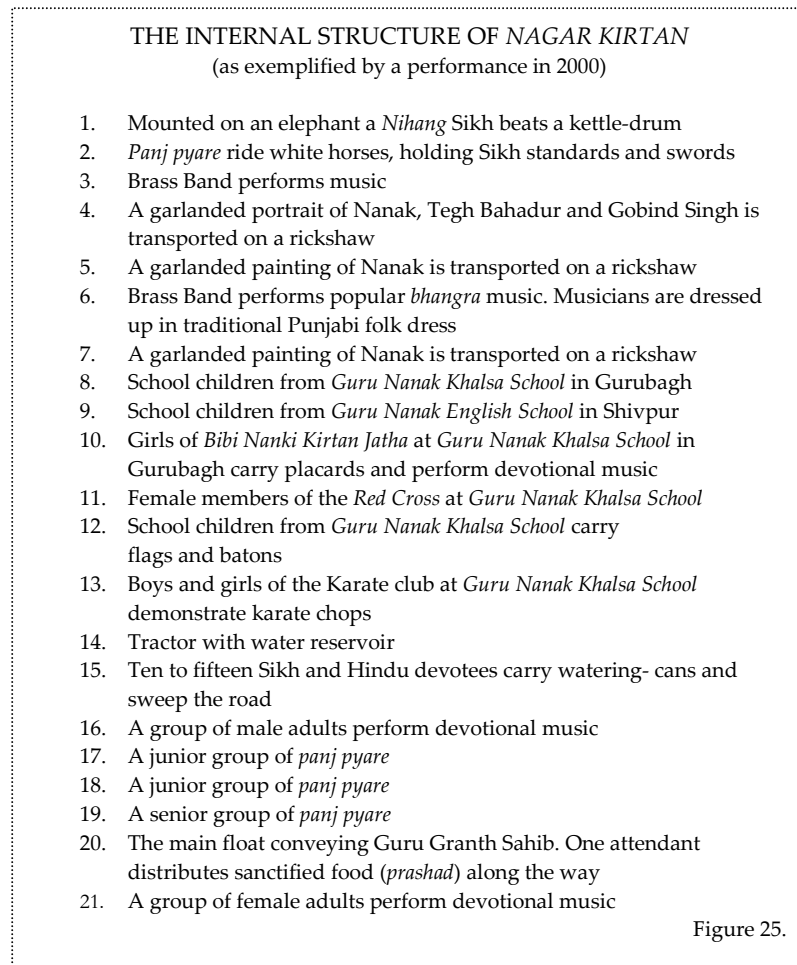
An analysis of the morphology of *Nagar kirtan* would indicate that there are several constituent parts that are ever-recurrent and important in the procession. Like other events when Guru Granth Sahib is taken out on tour, the performance of *Ardas* frames the beginning and the end of *Nagar kirtan* and thereby modifies the usual meaning of time and space by having the event sanctified by the Guru. Similar to the daily liturgies the scripture is installed on a float in an outdoor installation ceremony, and restored to the bedroom at the closing stage at night when the scripture leaves the parade and is put to rest. The arrival and departure of Guru Granth Sahib are two key events that mark out points of gathering and dispersion of participants and provide the external structure of *Nagar kirtan*. The procession is generally a well-structured arrangement at the beginning of the march, in consideration of school children and younger participants, but will loosen up and change form along the way with new elements added or others removed. Devotees and spectators may join in and depart from the procession more or less as they like. Only a senior group of *panj pyare* and adult men and women performing devotional songs in folk tunes may escort the scripture from the beginning to the very end.

Several scholars have observed that the order of people parading and other spatial dynamics within processions may suggest social and ideological hierarchies.<sup>660</sup> Typical of a standard performance in Varanasi is to deliberately position all participants in relation to the carriage of Guru Granth Sahib. The main float with the text will stand in the centre of attention, usually in the back section of the procession, and is spatially framed by the *panj pyare* and the groups of adult devotees. Young partici-

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<sup>660</sup> Marin 1987, Trainor 1997.

pants who represent different Sikh organizations and exhibit martial arts and worship modes, such as *seva* and *kirtan*, will go in the front under guardianship of teachers and senior members (See Figure 25). The concentric composition of these key elements of a procession – the text being surrounded by a social layer of the young



and adults who demonstrate devotional acts – serves to make the superior Guru present in a here and now context and underscores that what should be the object of veneration is not just the scriptural corpus, but the interior teaching and words. Devotees virtually take out the words of *Guru Granth Sahib* to aesthetically mediate the Gurus' teaching in music and in acts of charity that exemplify the teaching extended to implementation in social life.

Within the temporal and spatial dimensions of *Nagar kirtan*, social rules and differentiations in everyday life should be set aside to promote an ideal mode of rela-

tionship that emphasizes the absolute authority of the Guru. Through participation in the acts of *seva* devotees of various backgrounds are expected to acknowledge a shared lower status as disciples of the Guru. At the same time the internal structure of the procession extols collective norms that distinguish between *Amritdhari* Sikhs and other Sikhs. The carriage of the Guru Granth Sahib is always headed by groups of *panj pyare*, who symbolically display the high religious status granted to initiated followers within the community. Before the yearly celebration the local gurdwara committee will select the teams among community members. With exception for the smallest children, the five people representing the *panj pyare* should be male *Amritdhari* Sikhs of stable character who follow the Sikh code of conduct. In procession it is expected from the five men to walk barefoot ahead of the scriptural carriage while uninterruptedly reciting the *mulmantra* and courageously carrying swords in an upright position. Along the route they are not allowed to talk to each other or to anyone else. The same rule applies to the groups of boys who usually hold shorter swords and are requested to recite “Vahiguru” as much as they are able. The youngest participants are normally allowed to wear shoes, and instead of swords hold rosaries with 108 beads, by means of which they are to repeat the divine name. A local *granthi* frankly said that the devotional activities performed by the different groups of *panj pyare* are not necessarily “real” in the sense that their acts stem from inner devotion and feelings in the moment of acting. In his view, it was more correct to say that their actions function as exemplifications of Sikh virtues and devotional practices temporarily put on public display. With their bodies, dresses, and acts the *panj pyare* create kinetic images of the ideal Sikh saint and soldier (*sant sipahi*).<sup>661</sup>

As a public event, *Nagar kirtan* is an occasion for displaying religious Sikh activities to their own community and residents of the city. It may serve as a means for religious edification to strengthen common beliefs and pass on religious values to younger members. Children are enthusiastically encouraged to do acts of charity and demonstrate their skill in music and martial arts. Collectively participants display themselves as guardians of the religious power and authority enshrined in the text, and to partake in the procession is to be and become a Sikh. In a performative manner the procession attempts to create a self-representation of a coherent Sikh community that claims legitimacy to be visible and acknowledged in the outside society. Local congregations may hand out leaflets and exhibit placards with religious messages and invite prominent propagandists to create public awareness of Sikh doctrines, history, and social institutions. A middle-aged man said:

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<sup>661</sup> The physical effort to move throughout the city for a whole day makes adult members hesitate to play the part. Over the years I witnessed that the elderly team of *panj pyare*, expected to lead the procession from beginning to the end, consisted of the same individuals who took turns in representing history. These individuals were in different ways associated with the gurdwara committee and were reputed for their commitment. The boys composing the younger teams, on the other hand, altered between each celebration.

*Nagar kirtan* is a means for propaganda (*prachar*) among people in Varanasi. We inform the congregation and others about the Gurus, their birthdays and the programs we organize in the gurdwara. We are inviting people to share the festivity.

In the immediate context of a festival, *Nagar kirtan* is often perceived as a commemorative event that revives stories about the Sikh Gurus in the past and re-establishes their teaching in the present. The most palpable method to accomplish this is the exhibition of paintings and bazaar posters which depict the Sikh Gurus or anecdotes about their lives. For spectators these visual renderings may evoke memories of well-known legends in the narrative tradition. A more corporeal representation is the collective group of Sikhs moving in lines throughout the city. By demonstrating communal devotional activities participants are metonymically representing cardinal Sikh doctrines as taught and instituted by the Gurus. Men and women reciting the divine name and singing hymns from the scripture do not merely exemplify worship forms rooted in everyday practices, but epitomize key Sikh doctrines of remembrance and recitations of the divine name. The representation of school-children and members of the Red Cross, the public distribution of food and other activities, virtually embody the concept of *seva* in the shape of education, medical treatment, and a communal kitchen for all. In a similar fashion the display of martial arts, folk music and traditional Punjabi costumes do not merely enhance the festive atmosphere but also functions as metonyms for an ethnic affiliation to a Punjabi culture. For spectators and participants the total accumulation of religious and cultural activities performed in the various sequences of *Nagar kirtan* creates a narrative scenario of the Sikh religion, history, and culture.

To other participants *Nagar kirtan* may be seen as way of honoring and celebrating the particular historical Guru by taking the Guru Granth Sahib out in majestic splendor to grant blessings and *darshan* to the city and devotees. A local *granthi* said “*Nagar kirtan* is a celebration, to show happiness. Old people who cannot come to the gurdwara can still get *darshan* of Guru Maharaj ji when the carriage (*savari*) is coming to their neighborhood.” Sikhs residing along the route of the religious procession will say they are inviting the Guru and the holy congregation of Sikhs to their neighborhood. When arriving in a local area the procession will make a temporary halt to create spaces of interaction between devotees and the Guru. Families present the scripture with bowls of *karah prashad* which they have prepared in their individual households. The attendant guarding Guru Granth Sahib on the main float will present the food offerings to the Guru by cutting a straight line over the pudding with his dagger and mix it with the same offerings given by others and kept in a large cauldron. By means of this ritualized act the pudding is considered formally accepted and sanctified by the Guru and shared with the congregation. The pudding will be returned to the donating family as a materialized blessing for ingestion. In addition to this, one or two people on the main float will be busy distributing large quantities of *prashad* in the form of puffed rice or sugar pastilles to the public.

Although local Sikhs may ascribe various types of meanings to the ritual re-enactment of *Nagar kirtan*, the arrangement of culturally prescribed acts and symbols in the performance is yet another example of how the Sikhs create and confirm the supreme spiritual authority of Guru Granth Sahib. Participants moving about within the temporal and spatial framework of processions simultaneously define and re-embody religious experiences and notions of the presence and power of the Guru Granth Sahib. The various sequences of acts in processions can also be viewed as external strategies by which Sikhs personify the scripture in the context of enduring social relationships between Sikh disciples and the Guru embodied in the text. When Guru Granth Sahib is taken out on tour in processions the text will be surrounded by pious devotees who in acts of veneration make it a “social other” invested agency of a personal Guru. The concentric setting of the scripture in the performances points to the inner center of the text and underscores that what should be the object of veneration is not merely the scriptural corpus, but the words and teachings of the Gurus dwelling within the pages of the scripture.

#### ARTI

The congregation in Varanasi has established a special completion of *Nagar kirtan* when it is staged on Guru Nanak’s birthday. After sunset, when the procession reaches Gurubagh Gurdwara, the carriage of Guru Granth Sahib, illuminated by neon tubes and twinkling lights, halts outside the main entrance of the gurdwara. A large crowd of people gather in a circle around the vehicle, jointly repeating the words “Satnam Vahiguru”. A platter holding burning oil lamps (*diyas*), incense, and a pot of pure clarified butter (*deshi ghi*) are brought to the carriage. The chairman of the VGPC steps forwards. Facing the Guru Granth Sahib on the carriage he performs *Arti*, holding the platter which he moves in circles before the scripture. Simultaneously the whole crowd is loudly and jointly singing the *gurbani* composition *Arti*, while people intermittently slip monetary gifts onto the platter. The performance is thus merging the oral renditions of the *gurbani* text *Arti*, which is always ending the daily evening liturgy in the gurdwara, with the act of waving lamps before Guru Granth Sahib.

Cognizant of the fact that the latter practice of *Arti* disagrees with normative Sikh standards, the *granthis* apologetically stress the social functions of the ceremony. One of them asserted the Gurus disapproved of *Arti* as a form of worship and the Sikhs should not engage in it with purely religious motives. In his view, the circulation of lamps at Guru Nanak’s anniversary served two significant purposes: in Varanasi there are many followers of Guru Nanak who are not Sikhs and therefore the community adjusts the end of *Nagar kirtan* to worship forms that local inhabitants are familiar with. Since the *Arti* ceremony is conducted in the street and not inside the gurdwara, it is not necessarily contradictory to the Sikh code of conduct. Additionally, the ceremony is staged as an honorary task for the chairman of the gurdwara committee. During my fieldwork the late Ajit Singh Sabharwal was the main actor each year. People would say the *Arti* ceremony provided an occasion to pay gratitude for the contributions he and his family has made for the local community.



Immediately after *Arti*, the *granthi* presents an *Ardas* in which he excuses for all inconveniences the congregation has caused Guru Granth Sahib during *Nagar kirtan* and expresses thanks for the blissful completion of the auspicious journey. Headed by the elder group of *panj pyare* the scripture is restored to *sachkhand* to the melodious chanting of "Satnam Vahiguru". Inside the gurdwara religious programs with singing of *gurbani* may continue up to the late evening, but the yearly "town praising" and public procession of the scripture has come to an end.

#### SERVICE TO THE STANDARD

At seven in the morning on the day before a *gurpurub*, the congregation changes the saffron colored clothes covering the pole of *Nishan Sahib* – the Sikh flag – in the two gurdwaras. The rather small and informal ceremony is called *Nishan Sahib Seva*, "service to the respected flag". For several years the responsibility of this type of *seva* has been assumed to one elderly man named Karam Singh. After a customarily reading of *Ardas*, Karam is seated on a small board while the *sevadars* virtually hoist him more than a hundred feet above the ground by means of a lifting device. Karam manually uncovers the *Nishan Sahib* and ties on the new textiles until the pole is covered from top to bottom. The procedure takes between two to three hours to complete and ends with an *Ardas*.

One *granthi* explained that *Nishan Sahib Seva* on the Gurus' anniversary days is a tradition that goes back to the time when the standard was instituted as a Sikh symbol. "It is an act of reverence. *Nishan Sahib* should not be naked. It should always look good," he added. Up to the mid 1990s the gurdwara people used to change the cover twice a year in connection with *gurpurubs*, but because of environmental pollution the procedure is nowadays conducted on each *sangrand*. Community members donate the new saffron-colored coverings and give monetary gifts that will cover the expenses of the service.<sup>662</sup> Members who want to sponsor this *seva* on other occasions can also do so. The discarded garment of *Nishan Sahib* is believed to be pure and charged with blessings of the Guru and is therefore cautiously taken care of. When the old cloths fall to the ground they are wrapped in robes, and later cut into strips for distribution to devotees. People may keep the pieces of these cloths at their houses with reverence or sew shawls, and turbans from it. Some devotees will also carry smaller pieces of the cover in their handbag or wallet for protection and good fortune.

#### THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHT

On the day celebrating the Guru's birthday the air inside the Gurubagh Gurdwara will be filled with the smell of fried bread and vegetables. From the early morning hours men and women prepare huge amounts of food for a large-scaled public distribution of food. To local Sikhs this is a "day of happiness" that will attract thousands

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<sup>662</sup> In 2005 the "cost" of *Nishan Sahib Seva* amounted to 1000 rupees.

of young and old devotees from all over Varanasi's districts. In the morning they listen to different invited performers of *kirtan* and *katha*, and at noon share a meal together with other Sikh and Hindu devotees. In the Sikh calendar the day commemorating the individual Sikh Guru's entrance into the world is given the name *Prakash Utsav*, or "The Festival of Light".<sup>663</sup> To honor the moment when the spiritual glare manifested in the life of the Guru the congregation at Varanasi will frame the day with a more elaborate *Prakash* ceremony in the early morning and a nightly program at 1 am which celebrates the Guru's time of birth.

#### *The Light Circumambulation*

At about half past four in the morning people of different ages gather in the gurdwara to decorate a palanquin with robes and saffron-colored marigolds. The Guru Granth Sahib is solemnly mounted on the vehicle and carried by hand in a circular procession, followed by a large group of devotees singing *gurbani* hymns. This ceremony is called *Prakash Parikrama* – "the light circumambulation". On Guru Nanak's birthday in Gurubagh Gurdwara the procession makes a clockwise motion around the gurdwara hall, and on Guru Gobind Singh's birthday at Nichibagh Gurdwara the scripture is carried in a circle inside the courtyard. The procession slowly proceeds forward for about thirty to forty minutes and then enters the gurdwara to the sound of enthusiastic shouts of the Sikh *jaikara*. All participants gather around the palanquin to participate in the *Ardas* and then again exclaim the salutations when the *granthi* lifts up Guru Granth Sahib and carries the scripture to the throne. On these festival days the *granthi* will perform the installation ceremony with exceptional solemnity and grace. At the moment the scripture is opened all participants bow and when the daily *Hukam* has been pronounced people throw petals over the throne and bring forward flower garlands to be offered to the book. The human Guru is thus celebrated through the solemnized installation of Guru Granth Sahib since the scripture is the present Guru who/which brings alive their compositions and the same light.

#### *The Rain of Flowers*

Forty days before the anniversary of Guru Nanak the gurdwaras in Varanasi organize a double chain of unbroken recitations of the complete Guru Granth Sahib (*Akhand path ki larhi*), whereby a total of forty recitations are sequentially performed without interruption. Similarly, thirty days preceding the celebration of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday in the month of January one or two chains of *Akhand path* will be conducted. The cathartic end of these series of recitations – the *bhog* ceremony – marks a festive nightly event in the gurdwara. As it is popularly believed that the Sikh Gurus were born at 1.15 at night the auspicious ending of *Akhand path* is neatly adjusted to the minutes before the stroke of one.

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<sup>663</sup> The anniversary day celebrating the very first installation of the compiled scripture at Amritsar in 1604 is similarly termed *Pahila Prakash*, or "the first light".

In the evening of the *gurpurub* the congregation usually hosts invited *ragi* musicians to perform *kirtan* for about six to seven hours in a row. Although people will be coming and going throughout the evening, the gurdwara is rapidly filled with hundreds of devotees of all ages at midnight. As the clock approaches the time of the Guru's birth all participants listen to the auspicious ending of Guru Granth Sahib, the sound of which echoes from loudspeakers on the second floor. Simultaneously the gurdwara employees start walking around with baskets to distribute huge amounts of marigold petals to all devotees inside and outside the gurdwara. When the recitation comes to a final completion the *ragi* performers immediately begin to sing the composition *Arti*. On this occasion all participants pay extra attention to two verses of the composition that are derived from Dasam Granth:

The great sages became pleased and received comfort in meditating on the gods. The sacrifices are being performed, the Vedas are being recited and for the removal of suffering, contemplation is being done together. The tunes of various musical instruments like cymbals big and small, trumpet, kettledrum and Rabab are being made harmonies. Somewhere the Kinnars and Gandharvas are singing and somewhere the Ganas, Yakshas and Apsaras are dancing.

With the sound of conches and gongs, they are causing the *rain of flowers* [*phulon ki barka*]. Millions of gods fully decorated, are performing *arti* and seeing Indra, they show intense devotion. Giving gifts and performing circumambulation around Indra, they are applying the frontal-mark of saffron and rice on their foreheads. In all the city of gods, there is much excitement and the families of gods are singing songs of felicitations.<sup>664</sup>

When the musicians are singing the words "rain of flowers" in the beginning of the second verse, all people gathered rush towards the Guru Granth Sahib, throwing flower petals over the throne while loudly shouting with joy. In that moment the crowd is moving forward like a wave at the utterance of the words and within a few seconds the gurdwara virtually turns into a sea of saffron-colored flowers. The first time I participated in the nocturnal celebration, one of the *granthis* said: "People are expressing their happiness. From the last month *Akhand Path* has been going and they are just happy for the blessing they got." Afterwards the *granthi* will complete the program by reading an *Ardas*, repeat the daily *Hukam*, and perform the *Sukhasan* ceremony where the scripture is wrapped in robes and put to bed. Large amounts of *karah prashad* are distributed to all visitors, who, at about 1.45 am, leave the gurdwara

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<sup>664</sup> The two verses are found on page 79 in *Chandi Charitar* of Dasam Granth. Here I have used the translation by Kohli 2003: 184.

with their cloths, shawls and turbans sprinkled with petals. The celebration of the Guru's birthday has reached the end.



On the Gurus' birthdays Sikh devotees are virtually wrapping the scripture in a rain of flowers

### CULTURAL FESTIVALS

The ranking of festivals made by interlocutors in the semi-structured interviews indicates that Sikhs make a categorical distinction between the Sikh *gurpurubs* and cultural festivals, that is, seasonal events which are conceived to be a part of either the regional Hindu calendar or the National Indian calendar. Whereas most of the interlocutors emphasized the importance of taking action during a *gurpurub*, families and individuals would assign the cultural festivals various degrees of religious significance and participate in these festivals in more variable ways. During the twelve lunar and solar months of a year there were eleven festivals that my informants either mentioned as popular festivals among the Sikhs or claimed that they themselves observed on religious grounds or because they were Indians living in a North Indian culture (See Appendix 2). These festivals can be further divided into three subcategories based on the dominant theme and the action they evoke in the local setting.

The first category involves events during which family members, and especially women, aim to seek the welfare and protection of family members and strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead. At least four of the mentioned festivals (*Tij*, *Raksha Bandhan*, *Shraddh*, and *Karva Chauth*) can be incorporated in this category. The key elements of these festivals have already been thoroughly described in studies

on North Indian festivals.<sup>665</sup> In the following I will briefly exemplify how Sikh women in Varanasi may observe the festival of *Karva Chauth*. In a second category of festivals are those which local Sikhs believe preserve and extol a traditional Punjabi culture. Had the research comprised of more interviewees it is possible that many other festivals would fit into this group. Here I will briefly bring up a few contexts for celebrations of the festival *Lohri*. The third category includes national holidays (such as *Dussehra*, *Divali*, *Holi*, *Vasant Panchami*) that primarily focus on worship of particular Hindu deities. The typical staging of many of these festivals in Varanasi has already been covered by scholars.<sup>666</sup> Below I will privilege the description of *Divali*, since this was the only cultural festival mentioned by all of my interlocutors and thus was a clear favorite. The celebrations of *Divali* may also illustrate how Sikhs both share and attribute new meanings to a festival that is basically Hindu in origin.

#### KARVA CHAUTH

On the fourth day of the waning fortnight in the month of *Katak* (*Katak vadi 4*), nine days before *Divali*, some Sikh women in Varanasi observe the festival *Karva Chauth*.<sup>667</sup> In different areas of northern India *Karva Chauth* is an occasion during which married women worship the moon and fast in order to seek welfare, protection, and a long life of their husbands.<sup>668</sup> Before sunrise the individual woman takes a bath and adorns herself with new a dress. For the remainder of the day she abstains from food and water until the moon appears in the sky. At night she dresses up in red clothes (if newly wedded in the bridal gown) and decorates herself with jewels, bindis and henna. Together with the other women in the household or neighborhood she reads different stories related to *Karva Chauth* (*Karva Chauth Vrat katha*) about how mythological women in the past have resurrected the health and life of their husbands by undertaking fasts.<sup>669</sup> The evening celebrations may also include a *puja* directed to the Hindu deities Gauri Ma or Shiva and Parvati. While singing songs and praying for the well-being of their husbands, they symbolically keep a pitcher (*karva*) filled with sweets. Another central feature of *Karva Chauth* is the exchange of gifts between fam-

<sup>665</sup> Freed & Freed 1998, Singh & Nath 1999, Dogra & Dogra 2000.

<sup>666</sup> See Katz 1993. For the famous staging of Ram-lila programs – dramatizations of the *Ramayana* story – during *Dussehra*, consult Hess 1983, Schechner 1983, Lutgendorf 1991. A comparison between South Indian and North Indian celebrations of national festivals is provided by Fuller 1992.

<sup>667</sup> The term *chauth* means the “fourth day” and *karva* refers to the earthen pot with a spout – a symbol of peace and prosperity – that is traditionally used in the ritual performed during this festival.

<sup>668</sup> Freed & Freed 1998. See also the website published by the *Society for the Confluence of Festivals in India* at: [www.karwachauth.com](http://www.karwachauth.com).

<sup>669</sup> A popular *katha* tells about the woman Karva whose husband was caught by a crocodile and requested the lord of Death, Yama, to send the animal to hell. Firstly Yama refused her, but afraid of the devoted woman’s power he accepted her wish and blessed Karva’s husband with a long life (Menzies 2004, Mackenzie Pearson 1996).

ily members. The mother-in-law may give the daughter-in-law clothes, sweets and fruits that should be eaten before she commences the fast. The husband may offer his mother-in-law new clothes, and in return receives edible gifts, such sweets and almonds.

These chief elements associated with the celebration of *Karva Chauth* – fast and exchange of gifts – recurred in the accounts of my female interlocutors. A middle-aged woman of a Khatri family told me that on this day she used to get up at four in the morning and fasted for the whole day. At the end of the day she performed a small ceremony in which she offered fresh milk to the moon while uttering the words “May my husband live a long life”. Her family kept the tradition of preparing and giving *mathi* – sweets made of jaggery – to the in-laws on this day. The Sikh women I interviewed associated *Karva Chauth* with a joyous event, during which they wished their husbands well by fasting in the day, dressed up in attractive clothes at night, and gave gifts to family members. It is still noteworthy that the dark fourth of *Katak* is generally considered to be an inauspicious day. Some interlocutors said they would hesitate to schedule happy events, like marriage, on the dark fourth of the lunar month. *Karva Chauth*, on the other hand, is a good day for fasting, and by doing this, women are able to transform an inauspicious period to an auspicious event that will bring good luck to their husbands and family.

#### LOHRI

A popular seasonal festival that is strongly associated with a traditional Punjabi and North Indian culture is *Lohri*.<sup>670</sup> This festival occurs one day before *Makar sangrand*, the day when the sun leaves the zodiac sign of Sagittarius (*dhanus*) and enters into Capricorn (*makar*) near January 13<sup>th</sup>.

During the fieldwork I observed mainly three different contexts in which local Sikhs observed *Lohri*: firstly it is a special occasion for families when they received their first newborn baby. In cases where the baby is a son the family is likely to throw a big party to celebrate the increase of the family lineage.<sup>671</sup> With the setting of the sun families light bonfires and gather around them to perform folkdances and sing special *Lohri* songs. A second context of *Lohri* is in the public gurdwara. In Varanasi a Sikh family has taken on the responsibility for a yearly celebration of *Lohri* in Gurubagh Gurdwara by making a bonfire in the small garden. Participants will circumam-

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<sup>670</sup> There are various folk legends associated with *Lohri* and the most popular of them all is about Dhulla Bhatti, a brave rajput who, in medieval times, rebelled against the Mogul authorities. The story I was told in Varanasi narrates how Dhulla and a gang of robbers abducted a rich princess who was getting married. Even though Dhulla was a robber, he was good at heart and saved the honour of the princess. When the princess later received her first son in marriage she invited Dhulla to celebrate the occasion as a token of thanksgiving. Dhulla is often portrayed as a Punjabi Robin Hood, who steals from the rich, especially the Moguls, and gives to the poor.

<sup>671</sup> The first *Lohri* of a newly wedded couple is also considered a special event to observe in a big manner. People dress up in new clothes and serve large amount of food to relatives and friends.

bulate the fire for an uneven number of times whilst throwing sesame, puffed rice, popcorn and peanuts into the flames. When I participated in this celebration in 2001 a Sikh woman told me that this act is favourable for all kinds of wishes, and particular for a woman who wants and prays for a son. Sesame has the power to remove sins, she continued, and the amount of sesame seeds you throw into the fire is the number of sins washed away. On this occasion peanuts and popcorn that had been touched by the fire were picked up from the ground and served as consecrated food (*prashad*). Before leaving all participants performed *matha tekna* to the fire.

Thirdly, the celebration of *Lohri* may also serve didactical purposes. On the day of *Lohri* the teachers at *Guru Nanak Khalsa School* organize a cultural program to educate the children on Indian cultures. In 2001, for instance, Christmas and Id were co-jointly celebrated on the day of *Lohri* and the school children were to exhibit typical symbols of Christianity and Islam through art and costumes. Dressed up as Santa Claus and the Virgin Mary they were thus given popcorn, sesame, and sugar cookies to throw into a sparkling bonfire. Since *Lohri* is commonly thought to be a cultural event that brings Punjabi folk culture to its peak the school day was dedicated to cultural performances of traditional folk dances and music.

#### DIVALI

The festival *Divali*, literally “the row of lamps” (from Sanskrit *Depavali*), is undoubtedly one of the more joyous holidays in Varanasi. In the evening of the new-moon day in the month *Katak*, people all over the city light candles, oil-lamps, and electric lights in rows and decorative patterns.<sup>672</sup> The ghats leading down to river Ganga are covered with clay lamps and the streets and temples are virtually wrapped in nocturnal illuminations, creating a delightful, almost mystical atmosphere. *Divali* is a festive event for all generations. Young and old friends, relatives and neighbors wish each other well and exchange sweets and cards. The festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm and joy among children who are given gifts and enjoy themselves by lighting sparklers and firecrackers.<sup>673</sup> Late into the night the noisy rattling of crackers keeps sleepy residents awake and clearly advertises that this is a special night in Varanasi.

At the outset the common element of lighting lamps on *Divali* may seem to suggest that people perform somewhat uniform practices for shared reasons. But *Divali* is in fact a festival which has come to subsume a variety of practices that display variances in different regions and even between families and caste groups in the same village or town. To find a single story that can explain the reasons for celebrating *Divali* is likewise problematic since the festival has incorporated several mythologies associated with different deities and humans of exalted status. Freed & Freed (1998)

<sup>672</sup> In different regions of India the celebration of *Divali* may extend over several days and incorporates other festivals connected with it (see Freed & Freed 1998, Singh & Nath 1999).

<sup>673</sup> As a local saying goes, at *Divali* children should be given crackers for a minimum value of 25 rupees.

has interestingly demonstrated this diversity in their study of Hindu festivals in Shanti Nagar. On the day of *Divali* the male leader of a Brahmin household prepared a fire ceremony (*havan*) for worship of eight deities, of which the goddess Lakshmi was given special attention. In the same village the leather workers worshipped their personal guru by offering food and passing a hookah around a fire, whereas the nearby sweepers lit candles and sacrificed a cockerel to their ancestors.<sup>674</sup> Although *Divali* will present plenty of space for ritual and discursive variations, the outstanding features of celebrations among the Sikhs in Varanasi tend to give primacy to Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune and wealth, and two narratives of Hindu and Sikh origin: the mythical triumph story of Ram and Sita's return to the city of Ayodhya in the *Ramayana* epic and the commemoration of Guru Hargobind's return to Amritsar after his imprisonment at Gwalior Fort in the seventeenth century. The three rationales for *Divali* came forth in the interviews with local Sikhs and, as we shall see, people seem to live quite comfortably with the fact that they blend Hindu and Sikh practices during the festival.

In the days before *Divali*, street vendors in Varanasi are busy selling clay lamps and colorful plaster statues of Lakshmi and Ganesh. Traders are carefully cleaning their shops and preparing for the annual closing of accounts. Families whitewash and decorate their houses and buy new clothes and utensils. As the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Lakshmi is said to arrive on the night of *Divali* to dispell the darkness of the moonless night and bring fortune and welfare to all categories of people.<sup>675</sup> To lead her towards the businesses and private spheres people light candles and lamps on the outside and inside of buildings, and at night leave the doors or windows open for her entrance. Lakshmi is thought to be extremely careful about cleanliness and comes to places where there are lights. To clean spaces and please her with worship are the means by which her approval and favors are won. Since Lakshmi brings material wealth she is popular among merchants. Almost every shop-keeper in Varanasi will host a small shrine for Lakshmi and Ganesh at some elevated place in the store. To merchant castes, like Khatri and Aroras, *Divali* marks the new year when accounts are closed and new ledgers and books are opened. The peak of the festival is the traditional Lakshmi *puja* which in Varanasi is celebrated in shops and in private houses. The statues installed and worshipped usually depict Lakshmi seated or standing in a lotus with money flowing from her hands. The goddess is always accompanied with Ganesh, the son of Shiva and Parvati, as he destroys obstacles on the way and makes sure her blessings will reach her worshippers. Shopkeepers may invite local Brahmin priests to perform the *puja* for their business while families get together in the evening to offer Lakshmi and Ganesh incense, food, water and money and perform *Arti* before their manifestations.

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<sup>674</sup> Freed & Freed 1998: 96 – 101.

<sup>675</sup> Lakshmi's birth from the churning of the milk-sea and her intimate relationship to her spouse Vishnu is narrated in the *Vishnu Purana* (Wilson 1979 (1840)).



At Varanasi, like many other places, the festivities of *Divali* evoke oral renderings of the epilog in the popular *Ramayana* story. After Ram had defeated the demon king of Sri Lanka, Ravana, he and his wife Sita triumphantly returned to the capital of Ayodhya after fourteen years in exile. The final chapter of the story describes the joyous atmosphere when Ram entered the city: people were burning lights in golden dishes and waved them over his head. The streets were sprinkled with perfume and kettledrums created a joyous sound.<sup>676</sup> Both Hindu and Sikh interlocutors told me that a similar atmosphere is symbolically created during *Divali*. By shooting crackers people ward off the malignant forces and darkness and celebrate the triumph of good with rows of light. "It is a festival happiness, not an event of sadness," a Sikh woman said.

Modern writers on Sikhism frequently assert that *Divali* was originally a Hindu festival which the Sikhs historically transformed and attributed new significations.<sup>677</sup> In the sixteenth century Guru Amardas decided to gather his disciples during *Divali* (and *Vaisakhi*) for religious worship and guidance of a growing community. With his successor Guru Ram Das the city of Amritsar became the seat of the Guru and hence a meeting place for the Sikhs. The sanctioned story which connects the city to the celebration of *Divali* takes place during the sixth Guru Hargobind's leadership. The Guru was arrested and put in prison at Gwalior Fort under the order of the Mogul Emperor Jahangir. According to a popular version, Guru Hargobind was held captive for the charge of revolt, but Jahangir decided to set the Guru free when he found no grounds for the allegation. The Guru insisted that fifty-two Hindu princes of Punjab, imprisoned for the same reason, would be released along with him. The Moghul emperor agreed to the request, on the condition that only those who could catch hold of the Guru's cloak as he was stepping out of the fort would be released. Guru Hargobind therefore stitched a loose cloak with fifty-two strips for each of the princes to hold and thereby set all of them free. When the Guru returned to Amritsar the Sikhs were celebrating his arrival and heroic deed by illuminating the city. Henceforth the Sikhs converged at Amritsar to celebrate *Divali*.<sup>678</sup> In these days Harimandir Sahib is decorated with electric lights and lamps for three days in connection with the festival.

Disregard the origin of the three stories, they all seem to share fundamental symbolic messages about the dispelling of dark powers and the restoration of social order and good times. While Ram defeated Ravan, who kept his wife Sita captured at Lanka, Hargobind triumphed over the Mogul ruler and set fifty-two princes free. On their return to their respective seats of power people were celebrating their victory.

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<sup>676</sup> Prasad 1994: 577–578.

<sup>677</sup> See e.g. Walia 2002, Cole & Sambhi 1998. According to Oberoi (1995) *Divali* was one of the festivals which the Singh Sabha in the nineteenth century remolded to suit a modern Sikh identity. Commemoration of Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior Fort, rather than worshipping a Hindu goddess, was considered appropriate to a Sikh celebration of *Divali*.

<sup>678</sup> Another story alluded in connection with *Divali* tells about Bhai Mani Singh's martyrdom in 1738. While attending a congregation at Amritsar during *Divali* he was captured by the Moghuls and put to death.

The happiness took expression in the lighting of candles at Ayodhya and Amritsar – lights which show the way to Lakshmi during her annual visitation to fend off misfortunes and bring wealth.

The ways by which local people associated these stories with the celebration of *Diwali* suggest that far from all Sikhs privilege the legend about Guru Hargobind's release from prison. The majority of my interlocutors, especially Khalsa Sikhs, were well acquainted with the story of Guru Hargobind, but did not necessarily connect it with *Diwali* in the first place. A Sikh woman said she had heard in her childhood that Sikhs and Hindus share *Diwali*, but celebrate it for different reasons. An elderly man clarified that Hindus rejoice over Ram's victory, while the Sikhs commemorate Guru Hargobind's deeds. Other interlocutors would initially allude to the stories about Lakshmi and Ram, as the main reason for lighting candles and observing the festival. That these myths involve veneration and worship of Hindu deities was not perceived a dilemma for their religious identity as Sikhs. "We worship Lakshmi and Ganesh because we are Indians, not because we necessarily believe in them. It is an Indian festival and we are Indians," a middle-aged Khalsa woman said. Another Sikh woman in the same age-group thought the separation between Sikh and Hindu was irrelevant to *Diwali* celebrations: "This is a festival of all, both Hindus and Sikhs. We celebrate whether we belong to this or that religion. We just enjoy." Some interlocutors also provided interpretations of these stories to suit personal beliefs and likings. An elderly Sikh man, for instance, explained that the epilogue of *Ramayana* carries a deep universal message about purification and lighting of the divine glare of knowledge inside every human soul. Many of my interlocutors would however grapple with the connection between the story about Guru Hargobind and the celebration of *Diwali*. When I paid attention to the legend in attendant questions, some did not see the association to *Diwali* even if they had heard of the legend and could retell the outline of it. Unlike *Diwali* celebrations at Amritsar and other places in the Punjab,<sup>679</sup> the impact and popularity of the story about Guru Hargobind's triumphant deeds is more restricted among Sikhs in the local culture of Varanasi.

Considering that most of my interlocutors were shop-keepers of Punjabi merchant castes, it is not surprising they highlighted worship to the goddess of wealth as the significant event during *Diwali*. The performance of Lakshmi *puja* could take many different shapes between families – all from a brief and rather formal ritual before a poster of Lakshmi and Ganesh to hour-long and more elaborate ceremonies. What seemed, however, to be typical of Sikh observances was the tendency to bring together and blend elements of Sikh worship and a standard Hindu *puja*. New clay statues of Lakshmi and Ganesh were installed and offered a place on altars that were furnished with garlanded pictures of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh. When the

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<sup>679</sup> Already in 1959 Indera P. Singh noted that Sikhs in a village outside Amritsar did not perform Lakshmi *puja* at all but celebrated Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior Fort (Indera P. Singh 1959: 284).

customary *Arti* ceremony was performed for the Hindu deities the Sikh families would also wave the lamp or candles before pictures of the Sikh Gurus and in addition read the composition *Arti* from the Guru Granth Sahib. In many instances the *puja* would end with a Sikh *Ardas*.

A Khatri family, who let me observe a Lakshmi *puja* at their house on the day of *Diwali*, demonstrated how Sikhs still ascribe the highest authority to their Gurus in the ritual enactment. In their living room they had installed two colorful clay statues of Lakshmi and Ganesh on a tray decorated with rose petals. The father of the household began the worship by lighting incense and touching the feet of the deities. The whole family – parents and three daughters – gathered around the altar and lit twelve candles which they placed before the statues. The mother brought forward two boxes of sweets and fed the deities – first Ganesh and then Lakshmi – while the other family members bowed before the deities with folded hands. When the offerings had been made the father took out two newly purchased account books for the coming business year. Before opening the first book, he took the cover to his forehead in an act of reverence. On the first page he then painted a large swastika in turmeric (*haldi*) with his right hand. The drawing was held up to be shown and offered to Lakshmi. The same procedure was repeated with the second book. After this, the family brought Lakshmi and Ganesh to the family gurdwara that was built on a raised balcony in the living room. The statues of the Hindu deities were placed on the floor before a wooden stool holding a picture of Guru Nanak. On the side of the altar Guru Granth Sahib was installed on an elevated throne with large plates filled with sweets and food placed before it. The children lit more candles and clay lamps which they arranged in a row on the balcony rail. Facing the Sikh scripture, all family members went down on their knees to perform *matha tekna*. The father took a seat behind the throne and begun to read *Arti* while his daughters and wife listened in sitting positions. As the final moment of the *puja* the father performed the *Arti* ceremony, not for Lakshmi and Ganesh, but before four bazaar posters of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh decorating the walls in the living room. The mother carried the tray with candles into the kitchen to hold up the lights before the window and over the new utensils in order to invite in Lakshmi. After the hour-long ceremony the family sat down in the living room to enjoy sweets and food, all of which had been consecrated both by Guru Granth Sahib and the Hindu goddess of wealth.

### 4.3. IN TIMES OF NEED

Among the Sikhs in Varanasi there exists a stock of oral accounts of how people have been “cured” from infertility and fatal diseases by presenting prayers, reciting *gurbani* and conducting regular visits to the gurdwara. The stories carry evidence of the positive effects of engaging in a close relationship with the Guru, especially in situations where medical treatments have either failed or been refused. These incidents are not looked upon as miracles, but proof of a divine power exerting influences on human conditions and state of affairs through the words of the Guru.

The last section of this chapter will focus on what ritual theorists sometimes call “rites of affliction”, that is, rituals that “attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered.”<sup>680</sup> In this analytic category of ritual one may find various religious ceremonies and healing therapies that aim to affect physical, psychological and social dimensions of situations in which people experience suffering and disorder in life. How the occurrence of disorder is diagnosed and which type of ritual measure is taken usually depends on the way in which a culture interprets the human condition and its relation to cosmic forces or beings. Commonly these practices attempt to alleviate physical and mental afflictions of the human body and mind, using methods that stretch far beyond physical conditions of individual persons in order to seek intercession of supernatural beings. Rites of affliction may co-exist alongside scientific medicine as a complementary system which perceives health and illness “as symptoms of a broadly conceived realm of order or disorder that draws no hard-and-fast boundaries between the individual and the community, the mind and the body, or the material and the spiritual.”<sup>681</sup>

In the semi-structured interviews with Sikh informants in Varanasi, one section of the questions dealt with the religious steps people take in times when they or a family member is stricken by illness or in some other way experience suffering. The aim of these questions was to identify practices which people observe when they are confronted with a situation that threatens the ordinary social order and even life itself. The responses became illustrative of how secular, religious, and folk practices are pragmatically intertwined in the life world of the Sikhs. The Indian culture presents a rich heritage of medical and healing practices, integrated in the religious traditions and traceable to Vedic times. Today the use of western-style medicine, commonly labeled “English medicine” (*angrezi dava*), has greatly overshadowed the classical art of Ayur Vedic medicine, even though it is still employed as an alternative treatment. Sikhs in general have a very receptive attitude toward the use of modern medicine. They encourage medical care by establishing hospitals and care centers and are prominent among medical practitioners. This respect for the healing arts is considered to be embedded in the Sikh doctrine and tradition. There are several accounts of the human Gurus helping their contemporaries with medicine. The beloved legend

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<sup>680</sup> Bell 1997: 115.

<sup>681</sup> Bell 1997: 116.

about the humble Bhai Kanhaiya, offering water and medicine to both Sikh soldiers and their enemies in the battles, continues to inspire and serve as a model for many Sikhs. Giving medicine and helping the dying is not just a social activity but a religious action, which has become institutionalized through the gurdwaras.

Most of the families I spoke with approved of surgery and autopsy, with exceptions for operations requiring hair removal. In reply to the questions on what they would do when someone in their family fell ill most would in the first place promptly say “go to a doctor” or “take medicine”. But the use of scientific medicine has certainly not replaced religious action and healing therapies within the Sikh community, but complements it. A family may arrange an unbroken recitation in the gurdwara for a family member in poor health at the same time as he or she is medicated and undergoing a surgical operation. My informants unfolded a number of religious measures they either had or would take in case the family meets with suffering. The following section will firstly exemplify the different ways in which people may explain the causes of various physical and mental ailments and then illustrate how local people may seek remedies both in the Sikh religion and the surrounding folk cultures.

#### ETIOLOGIES AND REMEDIES OF AFFLICTION

The causation and diagnosis of physical and mental illness will, in the first place, be given medical and pathological explanations that recognize the causes and processes by which an individual has developed a certain disease or physical condition and treat it accordingly. But scholarly medicine is considered to have limits as it cannot always provide satisfying answers as to why one person is afflicted with illness and another is not, nor explain why some people remain unhealthy in spite of extensive medical treatments and efforts. It is at these borders of uncertainty religious explanations come forth and provide complementary etiologies to afflictions that involve social and cosmological factors far beyond the individual body system.

Because the lived religion is continuously relating to changing social conditions, local beliefs and conceptions related to physical and mental infirmities and disorders are multiple and varied within the local life world. Transmitted through a range of media, normative standards are often blended with cultural and popular beliefs, which are further colored by individual experiences and motives. It is therefore difficult to relate all the elements which go into the making of thoughts and behaviours related to illnesses and sufferings.

There are, however, two interwoven forces that most of my informants regarded as determinant of the present human conditions: the laws of karma and human fate predestined by God. All gave references to beliefs in the cycle of birth and death and perceived the accumulation of karma, the effect of one's actions, as the force that upholds bonds to life and determines conditions in the present and coming births. Alluding to popular beliefs, many asserted the human soul (*atma*) has to travel through 8.4 million births (*yoni*), of which of 4.2 million births are in the water and

the remaining on earth, before it reaches a human birth and is given opportunities to consciously improve the future through righteous acts. A middle-aged Sikh woman exemplified:

It is in the human birth you can recite the name of God and not in other births. The person who performs good actions, recites the name of God, like *Sukhmani Sahib*, and goes to gurdwara, will get rid of sins and improve possibilities for the future. The person who does not do this will go back through 8.4 million births.<sup>682</sup>

Nearly all divided the concept of karma into two broad categories of good and bad action, translated into intentional deeds, and emphasized that humans have limited capacity to know whether their actions will be meritorious or not. Soteriological beliefs, as the concluding chapter will elaborate further, often involve the notion of the human soul's travel to a divine court after death where divine accountants implement a balancing of karma and God pronounces a judgment that will regulate the soul to a new rebirth on earth. From a Sikh viewpoint the laws and regulation of karma are ultimately in the hands of God and only the supreme divine has authority to evaluate the qualities of human action. Interrelated with the system of karma is also the notion of a human fate which follows the divine will and order. Everyone must reap the fruits of the one's actions judged by God and thus when humans enter the world their fate will be written on their forehead. The Sikhs speak of this fate in terms of a divine "writing" (*likhna*) scripted in the court of God and in which all aspects of a human life are noted.

These two cosmological factors – the effect of karma and the divine predestination – provide the framework for religious interpretations of current human conditions. Why people are struck by illness, or in other ways unjustly meet with sufferings, is the result of karma from previous lives according to the written destiny. Sikhs will often explain human life in terms of a continuous oscillation between *sukh*, or "happiness" when humans experience peace and prosperity, and *dukh*, or "sadness" when dissonance and suffering shift the helm of life. Except for guru-oriented individuals who have received the divine grace and already "burnt" their karma, both *sukh* and *dukh* are inevitable parts of life for ordinary humans. While the former condition is frequently spoken of as a gift of God, dependent on the divine kindness (*kripa*) and will (*iccha*), the causes of *dukh* is the consequence of humans' previous karma that may be expressed in a variety of ways. All sorts of minor and major physical and mental ailments, financial troubles, grief and dejection, problems with one's partner or others in the society are just a few examples of afflictions encompassed in the notion of *dukh*. What appears to be injustice in the social world actually mirrors a divine justice and order, according to which all creatures will have to suffer

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<sup>682</sup> Others thought they would end up being born as a dog, snake, insect, or face more troubles in a human rebirth in case God judged their actions as bad.

punishments for misdeeds they have conducted in the past. "If a father has two sons and one becomes rich and the other one poor they do not end up like this because of what their father has done to them, but because of their karma from a previous life," an elderly Sikh man illustrated. To realize the extent of *dukh* within this world is often said to be a driving force that impels people to go on the religious path, while too much exposure to *sukh* becomes an illness which elicits arrogance and selfishness in people. The ideal then is to behave in a balanced manner and remember God in any state of affairs and perceive both *sukh* and *dukh* as conditions that occur in accordance with the divine will.

This does mean that people surrender to complete determinism. The human birth grants ability to perform actions that will generate good karma for the present life and existences hereafter. Reciting and listening to *gurbani* and doing *simran* of the divine name are undoubtedly the primary expressions of voluntary good action in this context. Most Sikh interlocutors claimed that devotional acts, and particularly the different ways of engaging in *gurbani*, can be used as preventive measure to reduce sufferings of already predestined events. A Sikh woman expressed this thinking: "Dukh will for sure come, but if you do *gurbani* recitations the effects of it will be less." People have to face *dukh* according to the cosmic blueprint of their fate and karma, but they may mitigate the effects. Performing religious action in situations of *dukh* often serves to alleviate sufferings, request divine protection, and provide mental peace, rather than changing the fate of what is already ordained. Whether human efforts will prove fruitful or not depends ultimately upon the will and kindness of God. "You may complain in front of God, that something bad was given to you in this life, but what will happen at the end is always up to the will of God," a middle-aged woman said.

Other interlocutors would instead stress that *gurbani*, and particularly certain verses selected by people graced with divine knowledge, indeed has the power to cure humans from physical, mental and social problems and even ward off misfortunes and bad influences caused by malevolent forces. The reasons for conducting religious actions in times of distress, and the various beliefs on the effects thereof, are at the very end regarded as a matter of individual faith, devotion and practice. Consider for example the middle-aged housewife who said she knew that her son was reciting daily from *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib*, the collection of *gurbani* verses for various situations of *dukh*. She suspected his motive to be the approaching exams, but she did not ask him, nor did he tell anyone. As the woman said: "Whichever recitation I do, I am reading for my own sake. What my son does, he is doing it for his sake. We never tell the reasons why." The following description of religious responses to experiences of *dukh* may yet illustrate that people seek to establish positive human-divine relationships by means of various worship acts, and above all through recitations of *gurbani*.

#### SEEKING DIVINE ASSISTANCE

What seems to be the first strategy of action in case an illness is diagnosed is to bring donations and food offerings to the gurdwara, perform *matha tekna* in front of Guru Granth Sahib, and then let the *granthi* perform an *Ardas*. It is noteworthy that all of my interlocutors mentioned *Ardas* as the first step they would take when being confronted with serious threats to their physical and mental health. Considering that these individuals had quite divergent, and sometimes conflicting, opinions about many religious matters, the unanimity indicates the extent to which *Ardas* has gained signification in the Sikh life. Because of its communicative functions the supplication becomes an important means to convey human requests and seek support from a divine recipient. People will say they pray to God before the Guru in order to “receive divine blessings”, “reduce suffering” and hopefully “restore health”. When a family member is facing a fatal destiny the individual family may even ask the *granthi* to include the name of sick in the daily morning and evening prayers for one, two, or more months in a row. In this context people will emphasize that the sincerity and commitment of the party seeking divine favours are of crucial importance for the wished-for results. Likewise they will say the performance of *Ardas* will assume more power and stronger effects if it is conducted by the *granthi* in presence of the holy Sikh congregation.

As the family arranges the *Ardas* for the afflicted member they may make a promise before God to carry out various worship acts, such as arranging an *Akhand path*, going on pilgrimage, performing *seva*, and so on. The general presumption underlying these vows is the belief that God is more likely to lend a helping hand if the sufferer or close relations take out time for righteous action on his or her behalf. Humans have to give offerings in the form of devotional acts before they can expect divine favours. Depending on the situation at hand, they may beforehand ensure the offerings while remaining ignorant of the final outcome or retroactively pay back when the request has been answered and the sufferer is getting well.

During the fieldwork in 2000 I came to experience myself how the enactment of these vows can be shaped. My father in Sweden fell seriously ill after surgery. When I explained the situation to some Sikh friends they suggested I arrange an *Akhand path* in the gurdwara for my father’s health. If he would recover, they said, I should do *seva* by giving food or money to any poor or needy person. I decided to follow their advice, and in the beginning of December the forty-eight hour long recitation started. This time the scriptural words, resounding from the loudspeakers, seemed to have a different resonance as it was performed for my father in a personally experienced moment of distress. The *Hukam* taken on this occasion was translated into Swedish and sent to my family back home. A few months later my father recovered and on the advice of my Sikh friends I contributed to the arrangement of a wedding for a poor family. The staging of *Akhand path* was translated as my offering of righteous action to seek a divine favor and the monetary donation to the wedding arrangements was a return gift for the divine kindness bestowed upon my family.



The most common approach to alleviate sufferings in times of *dukh* is to recite *gurbani* by oneself or have someone else do it on behalf of the afflicted person. It has already been described (in Chapter 3) that Sikhs have developed numerous methods of reciting particular *gurbani* verses, which are attributed a variety of positive effects on humans depending on the content and sentiment the texts evoke. When the ordinary state of affairs are in some or another way disturbed, the Sikhs will specify particular *gurbani* hymn which they take refuge in. Recitations of Guru Gobind Singh's composition *Chaupai Sahib*, for instance, are frequently alleged to provide divine protection and make the human mind/heart courageous and fearless. A Sikh woman in her sixties used to recite this hymn whenever she got into a rickshaw in the street, believing it would protect her from road accidents. A Sikh man of a younger age said he had performed *Chaupai Sahib* five times when his mother ran a high fever at night and fifteen minutes subsequent to the recitation her temperature went down. Recitations of Guru Arjan's beloved work *Sukhmani Sahib* is similarly attributed several significations. When a relative becomes seriously ill many make a promise to recite this text either five or twenty-one times daily for forty days, sometimes for the purpose of alleviating sufferings and even curing diseases.

The majority of my informants stated that they used the popular anthologies of *gurbani* verses particularly adjusted to times of crisis and suffering: *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib* which is "the destroyer of suffering," and *Sankat Mochan* or "the savior from troubles." A younger Sikh woman recounted how she had cured her disabled uncle when a wound on his body became infected. When doctors diagnosed the case as hopeless she committed herself to a forty-day long recitation period of *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib*. In the customary manner she kept a pot of water beside her and sprinkled the sanctified water in the house and on her uncle. She verified that her uncle restored health after her treatment.

A glance at any of the different versions of these anthologies will mirror that the concept of *dukh* involves far more than physical illness. In *Sankat Mochan* the 108 mentioned purposes for which the separate verses are to be recited concern both spiritual, social and material gains. Recitations can be conducted to gain mental and domestic peace, protection from vices and evil forces in humans, the atmosphere or dreams, to obtain money, good company, religious merits, and even salvation, or to rectify the order which have been disturbed in different social relationships. Some verses are specifically adjusted to crucial moments in life, such as before childbirth, marriage, at the possibility of being promoted or when receiving a verdict at court. The prescribed verses in these ritual handbooks often bear traces of a traditional agricultural life by referring to harvest fortunes and regional Punjabi cults, but also reflect migration and modernization in current times. There are verses to recite for the purpose of mitigating troubles on travels to foreign country with aeroplane, or to protect sons residing abroad and gain success in a business one has established in foreign land.<sup>683</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> See e.g. Giani Narain Singh's version of *Sankat Mochan*.

An account communicated by a Sikh woman in her forties may further demonstrate how the effects and power of *gurbani* hymns are sometimes associated with different degrees of suffering or illness. To mitigate “mild” worries in the everyday life and seek divine protection for family members the woman used to recite *Chaupai Sahib*. As she was very much afraid of the dark she read this hymn after sunset for mental strength and to remove fear. “Light comes quickly when I do *path* of *Chaupai Sahib*,” she said. The woman was also anxious about her daughter and husband every time they were outside the house after dark and did not return home in time. Whenever this occurred, she used to stand at the porch of their house reciting the same composition, believing that it would protect them and make them come back earlier. When someone in her family fell ill, she or someone else in her household used to go to the gurdwara and let the *granthi* perform an *Ardas* and make a contract-like promise to arrange for *Akhand path* if the sick person would restore health. Simultaneously, she would sit beside the patient and recite either *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib* or *Sukhmani Sahib*, depending on how serious the illness was. According to her categorization, the verses contained in the *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib* are specifically adjusted to situations and states of bad health when there is hope for recuperation. The collection of hymns was to be recited next to and together with the sufferer for 5, 7 or 11 times, or simply as much as possible. The woman did not believe the verses of *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib* would necessarily heal or cure a patient from an illness, but they did have the power to lessen or even remove pain from a sufferer. In case an illness threatened life and there was no hope for recovery, she used to read *Sukhmani Sahib* beside the sick. Recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib* was for her associated with deathbeds and was a religious act to beseech God for final peace for the human soul. Thus, the Sikh woman linked performances of *Chaupai Sahib* with protection in the daily life, *Dukh Bhanjani Sahib* with subtraction of suffering in surmountable states of infirmity, whereas *Sukhmani Sahib* was providing peace to humans near death.

Apart from the above-mentioned compositions, the Guru Granth Sahib is by many Sikh disciples regarded as a treasure trove of separate utterances of the Guru, which can, if recited correctly and with sincerity, invoke divine power to intercede in human affairs. A young Sikh woman illustratively voiced this thinking:

In Guru Granth Sahib ji there are many hymns for all kinds of trouble, hymns for ghost troubles, hymns for getting rich, hymns for business, hymns for removing sadness. There are hymns for meeting God, hymns for removing arguments. The main thing is the devotion. If you have faith and are determined, if you perform the *path* [recitation] properly with confidence, then your work will succeed.

The thread that runs through this and similar statements is the perception of the act of reciting *gurbani* verses as a devotional exercise which may generate a number of effects on the actors involved – people may overcome problems of illness, financial shortage, solve conflicts with one’s partner and other dilemmas in life.

One verse which stood out remarkably in the interviews and may exemplify the ways by which people select and ascribe separate *gurbani* excerpts the power to tangibly influence human conditions, is the following verse written by Guru Arjan in *Rag Bilawal*:

Not even the hot wind touches him, who is under the protection of the Supreme Lord. On my four sides is the Lord's circle [*ramkar*], so pain afflicts me not, O brother. I have met the perfect Guru, who has made the make. He has given me the medicine [*aukhadu*] of the Lord's name and I have enshrined love for the One Lord. Pause. That Preserver has preserved me and cured all my maladies Says Nanak, the Lord has extended His mercy to me and has become my Succourer.<sup>684</sup>

Here Guru Arjan depicts the secure state of a devout human who has united with the divine by using a metaphorical language from the context of healing. God has given the "medicine" of the divine name which cures all maladies and encloses the pious human within a circle (*ramkar*) that provides unconditional divine protection from all pains. An elderly Sikh man said he used to read these lines for five times before going to sleep to ward off nightmares and evil spirits during the dark hours. A female interlocutor alleged a recitation of the verses about divine medicine and protection has the power to cure diseases and provide protection from spirits and the bad effects of the evil eye. Using the semiotic terminology of Peirce, it would be possible to argue that the linguistic "symbol" of the protecting circle within the text assumes a more "indexical" character (e.g., almost as if a circle of protection was created in the reality) when the text is transferred to a performance context to be ritually enacted.<sup>685</sup> Moreover, the words "the medicine of Lord's name" are not merely interpreted to communicate a figurative statement about God's redemptive power, but are believed to become a real remedy for all who will recite the hymn. In other words, when the text, embroidered with the metaphors of a divine circle and medicine, is performed the recitations of the same text is attributed perlocutionary functions to actually manifest divine protection and even cure people from spiritual and physical afflictions in real life situations. Semantic interpretations of a single word, a metaphor, a parable, or a more general theme in *gurbani* verses will determine the expected effects that recitations may have on humans in an ever-changing social world and thereby also indicate the context in which these verses can be used. *Gurbani* verses are thus not merely performed to render the referential content of the texts, but recitation is a worship act presumed to activate the agentive power within the Gurus' utterances forever inscribed in the scripture.

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<sup>684</sup> GGS: 819.

<sup>685</sup> The meanings of a "symbol" are determined by cultural conventions and are therefore arbitrary. An index has a closer relationship to what it signifies and displays contact between the signifier and the signified (Peirce 1960).

In situations of need many local Sikhs pragmatically resort to a variety of sacred sources and agents who operate within what anthropologists uncritically or more reluctantly have termed “folk” or “popular” religion. Many of my interlocutors pointed out that consulting healers, astrologers, and other religious specialists was not a part of Sikh tradition and expressed scepticism about the various healing cults flourishing in a Hindu centre like Varanasi. When illness, barrenness or existential dilemmas create hopeless and oppressive situations, many will still resort to popular traditions to seek pragmatic results and do not necessarily perceive this step to be challenging to their religious identity as Sikhs. In attempts to manipulate the reality to their advantage, people will combine religious practices they consider to be compliant with a Sikh way of life with healing therapies and rituals services provided by their Hindu or Muslim neighbors. When the father of a Sikh family was diagnosed with a kidney stone and underwent a surgical operation in the hospital, for instance, the family arranged an *Akhand path* in the gurdwara. At the same time they organized a week-long repetition (*jap*) of mantras at the *Mahamrityunjaya Mandir*, a local temple which is dedicated to Mahadeva (Shiva) and is famous for a *linga* believed to be growing in size.<sup>686</sup> The temple is known for its power to increase the life-span of humans and avert death.<sup>687</sup> In this case the ritual repetition of Shiv-mantras was arranged to ward off suffering and possible fatal consequences of the surgery. When the repetition came to end the family staged a *puja* with fire sacrifice (*havan*) at the house.

On one occasion, when I was supposed to interview a young Sikh woman at her house, her sister met me at the entrance to cancel the meeting and inform me that the siblings had been struck by smallpox, or “got Sitala Ma”, as she put it. Smallpox is popularly believed to be a kind of possession of the disease goddess Sitala or the “cool one”.<sup>688</sup> As the eldest of the seven goddesses, Sitala both inflicts and cures humans of small pox. The goddess is cool by nature and only when she becomes agitated by heat will her wrath attack humans with a fever, spots and blisters – the characteristic symptoms of small pox. Series of rituals are undertaken in attempts to appease the heated goddess and contain her anger by coldness and thereby cure the victim from the possession. The temper of Sitala predestines the condition of the sick and only if the goddess is cooled will she become benevolent again.

As I got to know in subsequent conversations, the Sikh family had temporarily quarantined their house and kept the afflicted children in a separate room surrounded by branches of the *nim* tree. Since Sitala is believed to become upset by sound, smoke, and smell from frying pans and food perceived as “hot” in the Indian culture (such as onion and garlic), the mother of the house prepared only “cold” and boiled food for the whole family. To cool the angry goddess the mother collected

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<sup>686</sup> Eck 1993: 262.

<sup>687</sup> Parry 1994: 164.

<sup>688</sup> For studies of origin myths and ritual practices related to Sitala, consult e.g. Wadley 1980 and Dimock 1982.

water from Sitala Mandir near river Ganga and applied it on the children. When the disease abated, the family firstly went to the gurdwara to read an *Ardas* before Guru Granth Sahib and then continued to the goddess temple with water and *nim* leaves to cool Sitala. The family offered the goddess a small red handkerchief, a coconut and pleaded with her to leave the afflicted children and return to the temple. Afterwards my interlocutor told me that all the children of the household had earlier been vaccinated against small pox and after a medical check up the symptoms of the suspected goddess possession was diagnosed as an allergy. The woman said: "Even if we are vaccinated, Mata ji may come on people to give *darshan*. We will still go to the goddess temple. This is not in Sikhism, but personally I believe in it."

A central feature in the folk culture is the conception and identification of powerful benign and malevolent spirits that inhabit the cosmos. Etiologies of inexplicable illnesses or disorders often revert to beliefs in evil forces that involuntarily possess a human body and in various ways exercise negative influences on a person and his or her social surrounding. The influences can be overcome by different ritual methods and therapies performed by healers (*ojha*) who have the power to establish a diagnosis of the vengeful spirit or force responsible for human suffering and can suggest a cure with divine assistance.<sup>689</sup>

The Sikhs take up quite divergent opinions to the existence of spirits and malevolent forces, even within a single family. In some conversations the husband and wife had conflicting views and even started to argue about these matters. A *granthi* harshly criticized all beliefs in spirits and said it was "pathetic talk" (*bekar bat*), but in the same breath admitted that his own family had another view. The dominant view among advocates of normative Sikh values is that the belief in ghosts, evil eye and magic are superstitions contradictory to the Guru's teaching.<sup>690</sup> In the same breath they confirmed the power of *gurbani* to cure various physical and mental problems and told stories of how the human gurus worked wonders and had the power to release people from curses and witchcraft. Persons who have faith in the Guru's teaching, visit the gurdwara, and regularly recite *gurbani* will not be affected by these evil forces as their inner place is filled with devotion to God.

In the world view of other interlocutors the belief in ghosts and spirits is a central theme that often provides a framework of explanations to misfortunes and suffer-

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<sup>689</sup> The definition of an *ojha* is often settled by what the exorcist can actually perform in the local context, such as curing illness and alleviation of misfortune believed to be caused by spirits (Coccari 1986).

<sup>690</sup> A middle-aged *ragi* performer in the gurdwara said: "Believing in ghosts is the weakness of mind/heart (*man*). When someone has stomach pain he will visit three to four doctors and if he is not cured he will continue to tantrics, pandits, and babaji and tell them his problem. The healer will open and close his eyes and then say that something magical was done by the neighbors. For 5000 rupees he offers the suffering man to perform worship for the problem. This is just superstitions and *gurbani* does not believe in this. *Gurbani* is knowledge of God, how to get attached with god. For physical problems one should go to a medical doctor."

ing that strike a family. A Sikh man told me that the excruciating death of his eleven year old son was caused by black magic performed by an evil-minded neighbor who dispatched a lethal mantra in the name of his son. For another man, the sorcery of a jealous female neighbor was explained as the underlying cause for decreasing profits in his business. People who take the existence of spirits and ghosts seriously will argue that people do not fully believe in magic or “superstitious” things until they have witnessed the effects of these troubles. “The person who has never experienced these kinds of sufferings will consider it superstitious beliefs, but the person who is suffering knows the existence of spirits,” a middle-aged Sikh man said. A more common approach is to admit the existence of malevolent forces, but in the next moment state “I do not believe in them.” Spirits and ghosts are generally believed to be attracted to people who fear them and whose heart/mind (*man*) is weak. To publicly assert disbelief is thus in itself a means to protect oneself from attacks of malevolent forces.

Even if there is a large margin for doubts and disbeliefs in spirits and ghosts, people will still consult different specialists and defined practices in situations where problems are accumulating. The *granthi* and other employees in the gurdwara said they cannot stop devotees from seeking religious services for reasons they themselves might find suspicious or even contravening *gurbani*, since they stand in a dependant relationship to the congregation. The performers I spoke with claimed that no one had ever consulted them for problems with ghosts or spirits, but they did provide community members with *gurbani* verses thought to protect humans from malevolent forces. Children who repeatedly fall sick and cry incessantly, for instance, are suspected of being under the effect of the evil eye or spirits. The mother will consequently bring her child to the gurdwara and request the *granthi* to restore his or her health with *gurbani* recitations. Well aware that many community members, even their own family members, believe in a world of spirits, the *granthis* often take a neutral position to emphasize the positive effects of remembering God, while tactfully leaving out judgments about people’s personal beliefs.

According to a popular demonology that frequently surfaced in discussions, the different types of spirits and ghosts can be generalized into three broad categories: firstly, there are spirits which are naturally a part of the creation and not necessarily harmful to humans. The malicious spirit in this category which has a tendency to cause people problems every now and then is the *jinn*, regarded to be an “evil spirit”. The second category involves spirits of humans who have died an unnatural and untimely death or did not have proper death rituals performed. They are likely to end up as a *bhutpret*, or a ghost caught between the world of humans and the abode of ancestors, who possesses the power to create troubles. A ghostly existence is seen as a punishment for bad karma in previous lives which the spirit must act out to its final account. Since *bhutpret* are tormented human spirits without peace, they often have a particular identity with gender, age, religion, caste, and behavioural characteristics specified. A restless spirit of a Brahmin woman, for instance, will be called *Brahm bhutni* – the female Brahmin ghost. *Bhutpret* of Muslim origin are especially dreaded

as they are believed to be unsatisfied with the disposal of their bodies through burial and are constantly dwelling in graveyards. Generally a *bhutpret* haunts a person when being abused, disturbed or in some other way bothered by unaware or careless humans.

Thirdly, there are spirits evoked by *jadutona*, or magic. Out of envy, hate, or some other malicious motive people engage sorcerers to deliberately cause spirit trouble to people by use of mantras and ritual objects. The effects of *jadutona* can be deliberately directed to a chosen recipient or just fall upon an unlucky person. Spirits that are exorcised from possessed humans can be transferred to different objects, like pots, cords, cloths, and the like that are placed in private houses or in public spaces. Whoever will touch the material object containing the spirit runs the risk of being afflicted. Another oft-mentioned method to cause spirit troubles is when a sorcerer mixes human ashes from the cremation ground (*masan*) or remains from animals with drinkable or edible substances and entice a victim to ingest it. Depending on which remnants are used, the person consuming the substance will be possessed by the spirit of the dead human or animal and unconsciously adopt its behavioural characteristics. Possessions of spirits evoked by *jadutona* or *masan* are considered extremely problem-ridden.

Another troublesome power is *buri nazar*, the evil eye, which can be evoked by speech, a look, or sometimes only by a thought.<sup>691</sup> Some people are considered to possess a malevolent eye and may, by a mere look, ruin a business, cause an illness, or in some other way create troubles. The evil eye can be compared with a kind of jealousy, but the cause of its devastating effects still extend far beyond an emotional state and may not be intentionally triggered. As a male interlocutor said: "Sometimes children get the evil eye from their own parents, because they think their child is very beautiful. 'What a beautiful son he is', and he gets the evil eye." Well-intentioned compliments, especially to children, may arouse suspicions and fear of the evil eye. At the entrance of almost every shop or business run by Sikhs and Hindus in Varanasi one finds threaded pieces of a cactus or lime surrounded by green chili pepper hanging to protect from the evil eye.

### THE HEALING PRACTICE AT PAHARIA

It is the month of April in 2001 and I am sitting in the living room at the house of Kuku ji at Paharia a few miles north of Varanasi. Kuku ji is a Sikh, originally from Andhra Pradesh, and runs a business selling parts for tractors and minibuses. He lives with his wife and children in the upper apartment of a two-storied house with a large terrace on the first floor. Every Sunday and on every full-moon day Kuku ji and his family temporarily transform their home into a healing practice at which they admit patients suffering from physical diseases and mental, social or financial troubles that have been caused by magic, spirits or the evil eye.

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<sup>691</sup> For an introduction to Indian beliefs in the evil eye, consult Maloney 1976, Troisi 2000.

A Hindu woman suffering from severe migraine enters the consulting-room. She respectfully bows down before Kuku ji sitting in the sofa, touches his feet, and takes a seat on the floor in front of him. Holding a glass of water in one hand she explains, almost inaudibly, her problem to him. Kuku ji takes the glass from her, places it in his right hand and raises it close to his mouth. While keeping his eyes closed he starts to recite a *gurbani* hymn over the fluid. In a little while he blows three times in the glass, creating small ripples on the surface, and stirs the water with his right forefinger. He returns the water, which now has transformed into a healing *amrit*. Kuku ji then approaches the woman and puts both hands on her head, with the thumbs pressing the temporal bones, and in a gentle manner starts to “pull out” the headache by moving his fingers towards the thumbs. The act is repeated a few times before Kuku ji releases the woman from his touch and tells her that she will be fine after fifteen minutes. The woman salutes him respectfully and goes out. Less than ten minutes, however, she returns to inform him that her headache has indeed disappeared. Kuku ji turns to me, explaining that this is the power of *gurbani* and the blessing of his respected mother – clients are cured by drinking *amrit* and receiving his touch.

For more than forty-five years Kukuji’s mother, Mata Narinder Kaur, was a devotee and social servant of *Dehra Sahib*,<sup>692</sup> a temple located in the Una district of Himachal Pradesh. At this site a descendant of the Sikh Gurus in the Sodhi lineage, Vadbhag Singh Sodhi, performed religious practices and by reciting *gurbani* mastered the ghost sovereign of *kaliyug* in the eighteenth century. The ghost-king, Nahar Singh Bir, was converted to the Sikh religion and up to this date he is believed to come to *Dehra Sahib* during the festival of Holi to help afflicted people. The site is believed to hold the power of Vadbhag Singh and is nowadays a popular pilgrimage centre for all those who seek a remedy for mental and physical afflictions caused by troubling spirits. By devotion and service Mata ji received a blessing from *Dehra Sahib* and empowerment to heal and exorcise spirits herself. At Paharia in Varanasi she established a local practice to cure patients by reciting *gurbani* and distributing *amrit*. For several decades she arranged annual pilgrimage tours to *Dehra Sahib* for people with severe spirit afflictions.

Mata ji could foresee when her lifeline was reaching its end and five days before her death in 1999 she presented her last will to Kukuji, who recalled her last words: “After me you have to take care of the congregation. You should always be polite, not aggressive. Listen to their problems and give them *amrit*.” When Kukuji, after some hesitation, agreed to accede to the succession Mata ji immediately transferred her power by giving him blessings, a mantra (the *mulmantra*) and instructions on how to prepare *amrit*. Thirty minutes later Mata ji died.

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<sup>692</sup> *Dehra*, meaning “shrine” or “temple”, is a commonly-used name for the temple complex which consists of several important shrines and gurdwaras. The temple complex dedicated to Baba Vadbhag Singh is sometimes called *Mairhi Sahib* (*The Tribune* 1999-01-16).



But Mata ji's death was not definite. My experience from conversations with different Sikh interlocutors in Varanasi reveals that many maintain a relationship with Mata ji and consider her very much alive, as an active agent still intervening in the daily life of people. Even after her death she continued to give *darshan*; she appeared in dreams and guided people to the healing practice at Paharia. Kuku ji said he often felt her presence and before any task always took permission from her. Whether local Sikhs believed in Mata ji's ability to heal or not, most of my informants had a story to tell about her, as in the case when she exorcised a female "shadow spirit" who possessed a young Sikh woman named Aman.

#### THE CASE OF AMAN

At the age of twenty-one Aman, a student at a college in Varanasi, became afflicted by a Muslim spirit. One day, as she and her friends were eating snacks in the playground, Aman threw the small leaf-plates in a nearby well and immediately felt as if she was pushed back by something. Shortly thereafter her family started to notice a change in her behaviour. She began to lose her voice, had hiccups, felt constantly ill, and sometimes screamed hysterically while pressing her neck. At first her parents did not consider the possibility of spirit possession but suspected physical or mental illness and therefore consulted different doctors and psychiatrists, but without any positive result.<sup>693</sup> When the wearing conditions extended over more than a year it was a neighbor who suspected affliction by a supernatural being and advised the family to visit an exorcist. On the advice of a friend they first went to the Sitala temple in Adhalhart outside Benares. Although Sitala Ma is consulted when people contract chickenpox or smallpox, the family was told that the Sitala mother provides "coolness" and their daughter would get well if they made a wish at her place. Accordingly Aman's mother made a promise to bring her daughter for *darshan* of Sitala if the conditions would change. At the same time Aman's father brought her to Mata ji in Paharia.

The healing power of Mata ji was exercised through a divinatory session, where the problem was diagnosed, and then exorcism rituals to rectify the problem. At the very first visit Mata ji made the diagnosis: Aman was afflicted by an *opri chaya*, a "shadow", often used for a more benign form of spirit affliction. She gave *amrit* prepared with *gurbani* to Aman's father and instructed him to medicate his daughter daily in the morning and evening. Whenever the symptoms appeared he should sprinkle the water-nectar on her. This was the first measure to "cast out the spirit" (*jharna phukna*). Irrespective of the cause and mode of affliction, spirits and ghosts do communicate with humans and in order to be able to cure the afflicted the healer should identify the ghost by making it play (*khelna*), speak (*bolna*) or shake (*hilna*)

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<sup>693</sup> Kapferer (1991), for instance, illustrates how different diagnoses of the symptoms of afflicted young women are at first exposed to a discursive process of negotiation and interpretation among people in the nearest surroundings of the afflicted. During this process the women may be given different types of treatment before the demonic is slowly shaped in discourses.

through the possessed victim's body. During the divination session the ghost reveals itself and usually exploits the victim's body and senses in the most grotesque way: heaping abuses, screaming, and swinging the head and arms.

Mata ji requested the father to bring Aman to the clinic for séances on five Wednesdays in a row. Before every visit Aman was told to not take bath or comb her hair and to keep her hair untied. During the first sessions Mata ji tried to force the ghost to speak by pulling Aman's hair and hitting her, but without success. The "shadow" was stubbornly silent. Not before the third visit did it begin to communicate, and during the two following visits Mata ji was able to chart the spirit's identity, the cause of the affliction, and set the terms for its release of Aman's body. The healer put up a strategy and began negotiations with the ghost. This can be a tricky task since ghosts are believed to be extremely mendacious.

Since Aman's father was the only person present at the practice, he recollected the dialogue that took place between Mata ji and the spirit:

Mata ji asked:

- Who are you?

She said:

- I am Selma

Then Mata ji asked:

- From where have you come?

She said:

- From Madhanpura.

Then she asked:

- Why did you catch her?

She said:

- Because she threw a tasted leaf-plate on me, so I caught her.

She asked:

- How will you leave her?

Then she said:

- If they will do offerings for me. Give me salvation. Then I will leave her.

Then Mata ji asked:

- How will we be confirmed that you have left her?

She said:

- I will leave a blue mark on the body.

Mata ji asked:

- Where?

She said:

- On the feet. When I leave she should not turn her face or watch me.

The dialogue is a reconstruction from a fragmentary memory, but may still give an idea of how Mata ji was communicating with spirits. She found out that the *opri chaya*

was the shadow of a Muslim girl, a daughter to a butcher, who committed suicide by drowning herself in the well. Selma possessed Aman because she was insulted by the tasted leaf plate thrown on her. Objects touched by human saliva are believed to contract pollution and unintentionally Aman exposed Selma to an impurity by means of a leaf-plate. This is an insult, even to ghosts.

Eventually the healer and the spirit will reach an agreement: the spirit promises to leave the troubled person in exchange of certain demands. It may require some offerings or performances of certain rituals over an extended period. In return, the spirit promises to make a gentle departure, which otherwise can be a painful experience for the afflicted, and not cause any trouble again. Selma's spirit could not find peace because she died a bad death by committing suicide. She longed for release of her ghostly existence and this was also her condition for leaving Aman. The family therefore went to one of the gurdwaras in Varanasi to give the offering Selma required. *Prashad* of twenty-one rupees was offered to Guru Granth Sahib, while the *granthi* performed an *Ardas* in which he wished for the peace of Selma's spirit and relief to Aman's sufferings. According to the family the prayer was made "in the name of Selma" and thus worked as a post-cremation ritual to release the spirit from her bondage to the world and attain peace. By then Selma was no longer an ethereal and elusive shadow but had come to assume a rather personal character in the discourses of Aman's family members. Although the prior motive was to help their daughter and sister, the family organized the offering and the prayer in the gurdwara to liberate the spirit of the Muslim girl.

As Selma had promised she signed her withdrawal. In the moment the spirit left, Aman lost consciousness and regained it when Mata ji and her father sprinkled water on her. But she repeatedly complained about pain, and when they examined her body they found a bite-mark on her foot. The pain passed but, as her mother interposed in one conversation, "the mark stayed for a long time and still she has blue marks on her body." For Aman the experience of exorcism was accompanied with amnesia; she had been in a state of trance and did not remember what happened to her.

Spirit possession, especially among women, has been a popular theme of study among anthropologists, who have interpreted the notion of a person being "possessed" and exorcism from the theoretical frameworks of psychology and phenomenology. For quite some time scholars approached possession as an expression of mental diseases and stress, and focused primarily on the psychological condition or the social position of the suffering person. Women manifest and enact spirit affliction when they experience situations that cause mental disturbances and use it as a strategy to counteract oppression and their subordinate position in a male-dominant society.<sup>694</sup> The framework of possession legitimizes behaviors which under normal conditions are considered socially disruptive, and simultaneously give women voices to

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<sup>694</sup> See Freed & Freed 1990, Kakar 1983, Lewis 1989.

articulate suppressed needs. Religious interpretations, as explanations to experiences of spirit possession, are of marginal interest in these studies.

In more recent years anthropologists have criticized these interpretations for being too entangled in Western concepts of a person and instead paid attention to indigenous expressions of subjective experiences. In a phenomenological study, Dwyer distinguishes between the phenomenon of spirit possession and interpretations of the same, which are always dependent on cultural understanding. In the North Indian context different diseases and problems which are interpreted in terms of supernatural influences appeal to pre-existing religious and cultural discourses. The fact that women more often claim to experience spirit problems should, according to Dwyer, not be seen as conscious strategies in deprived situations but a phenomenon related to cultural conceptions which consider women weaker and more exposed to affliction. Spirits are attracted to impurities which make women an easy target as they go through several periods of impurity during menstruation and childbirth. People thus interpret and attribute diseases and problems to supernatural causes, derived from their own cultural and religious understanding.<sup>695</sup>

As the case of Aman illustrates, a healing tradition is dependant on the cognitive structure of a belief in spirits, the agency of an acknowledged healer, patients, and a healing process during which the healer will use a particular method or ritual. A person considered possessed by spirits does not merely invent a drama to ventilate inner conflicts or mental stress, but people seriously believe in the existence of spirits and other supernatural forces that may cause trouble if disturbed or attracted to humans. The Sikh healing practice of Mata ji presupposes this cultural understanding. What distinguish Mata ji and Kuku ji from other specialists in the local context, however, is their adherence to a healing tradition within popular Sikhism and the religious measures by which they cure patients. The family of Aman, as well as other Sikh clients, stated that the power of Mata ji, as a healer and devout Sikh, depended on three interrelated factors: the blessing and mantra she had obtained from *Dehra Sahib* and which allowed her to work in the tradition of Baba Vadbhag Singh; her own spiritual achievements in life; and the use of *gurbani* hymns in the immediate healing situation. Many said that Mata ji had been graced with divine power from intensive meditation and austerity practices. She had internalized *gurbani* and committed herself to recitations for sixteen hours a day. As a result of this dedication, Mata ji was graced with knowledge of *gurbani* and knew which hymn suited for which situation or problem her clients experienced. But it was only her initiation in the tradition of Vadbhag Singh that provided her authority to cure people. Before exemplifying how *gurbani* hymns are ritually used for healing purposes in the practice at Paharia, we must first examine the tradition which legitimizes this usage.

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<sup>695</sup> Dwyer 2003.

## BABA VADBHAG SINGH

When I first met with Kuku ji in 2000 he handed me a printed book in Hindi with the title *Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi* and said it would explain the tradition he was working within. The book contained 108 pages about the “life-story” (*jivan-sakhi*) of Baba Vadbhag Singh in the hagiographical genre and was edited by a Sikh named Mondhari Sant Darbara Singh.<sup>696</sup> In the following I will render the outline of the hagiographical pages as it provides the narrative background to Kuku ji’s practice in Varanasi.<sup>697</sup>

*Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi* attempts to communicate a testimony of a divine intervention to restore order in a chaotic world through the agency of the devout Sikh Vadbhag Singh. He acts on a divine



The life story of Baba Vadbhag Singh on poster

command and assumes power to fight against evil forces by using hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib. The life-story begins to depict the patrilineal genealogy of Vadbhag Singh, not only to the Sikh gurus, but to Lav and Kush of the solar dynasty – the two sons of Ram and Sita in the *Ramayana* story. Together with a descriptive summary of the lives of all ten gurus, the genealogy extends over thirty pages of the text. Vadbhag Singh is born into the Sodhi clan and is a direct descendent of Guru Hargobind. A framing like this assist the readers to understand the narrative context and provides the central character of the text legitimacy by a strong appeal to the Sikh tradition. The story confirms that Vadbhag Singh was predestined for grand work: at birth his forehead was shining and divine words resounded in the sky. From childhood Vadbhag Singh loved *gurbani*

<sup>696</sup> Interestingly a *mondhari* stands for a person who has taken a vow to remain in silence. This is certainly a strategy to provide authenticity to the story: the *sant* immersed in silence must speak up to tell the story of Baba Vadbhag Singh.

<sup>697</sup> Except for *Dehra Sahib* (Himachal Pradesh) and Kuku jis practice in Varanasi, there are, according to my knowledge, several individuals who operate within the same tradition in Ludhiana and Kartarpur (Punjab). Apart from telling the life-story of Baba Vadbhag Singh, the structure and content of the book also suggests that an oral rendering of the text may in itself be a treatment of different problems caused by spirits and other supernatural forces. In an article I have analyzed how the written life-story can be approached as a “performative text” which does not merely communicate the mythologized origins of a healing tradition and verbalize popular imagination, but it is also a ritual hand-book and can be viewed as a ritual performance in itself when read and listened to. The book may thus have many different functions depending upon who is using it and for which purpose (Myrvold 2004b).

and took up a discipline to recite hymns from morning to evening.

The outline of the political conditions in Punjab corresponds in the main with the approach of Sikh historians.<sup>698</sup> In 1756 the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Durrani invaded India for the fourth time and Punjab was annexed to his Empire. As the chief of Kartarpur, Vadbhag Singh conflicted with the new governor in Lahore (Tahmur Shah) and his military adjutant in Jalandhar (Nasir Ali) when two traveling Afghan officers were murdered in Kartarpur. In the hagiography this event forms the prelude to very hostile relations with the new rulers before the Sikhs, conjointly with the former Muslim governor of Jalandhar (Adina Beg Khan), defeated and later expelled the Afghans from Punjab in 1758.

The narration of Vadbhag Singh's deeds during the invasive years is painted in salient heroic and devotional color, embroidered with several moral allusions. Throughout the story he holds the centre stage and all events are performed in relation to him. He unites the dispersed Sikhs living in forests and commands them on the battlefield. He is a courageous warrior and the principal political character, sometimes invested with a surprising retaliatory harshness. When Nasir Ali is captured in the last battle Vadbhag Singh orders his Sikhs to burn the governor alive, just as he had burnt down gurdwaras. Simultaneously his character evinces strong sentimental traits. When he hears about the seducing of women, burning of gurdwaras, killing of cows and converting of Hindus by the Muslims, his heart becomes so sad that he cries blood instead of tears. Additionally and above all, he is the ideal Sikh saint, devoted to *gurbani* and the Sikh *sangat*, who acts by divine orders. Vadbhag Singh is the ideal Sikh saint-soldier personified.

Where the empirical history of Vadbhag Singh more or less dries up – he leaves Kartarpur for good and resides in the mountains until his death – the hagiography approaches its narrative climax. After the final defeat over the Durrani army Vadbhag Singh indulges himself in religious propaganda and social service of the community. Gurdwaras are reconstructed and courts of Guru Granth Sahib are decorated again. In the post-war situation, however, evil forces emerge through other channels and this marks a new beginning of the *jivan-sakhi*:

In the world at that time hypocrisy, deception, insincerity and sins were increasing, the demons of sorcery, cemeteries, ghosts and Muslim spirits spread out. Many people started to play by hitting their heads. The body gave terrible sounds.<sup>699</sup>

After witnessing these sufferings Vadbhag Singh reaches a moral turning point: he must do something for the welfare of humanity. It is here that the story takes a turn.

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<sup>698</sup> It is possible to assume the historical existence of Vadbhag Singh, even if the history is relatively taciturn about his life. See e.g. Gupta 1998. The story of Vadbhag Singh's defence of Jalandhar is mentioned in *Guru Panth Prakash* by Ratan Singh Bhangu (Bhai Vir Singh 1982).

<sup>699</sup> *Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi*, p. 57

The enemy is no longer a human identifiable entity, but spiritual beings and more abstract predicaments of humanity. It is not a question of protecting and defending women, society, and country by the force of arms but other means are required to remedy humanity from suffering.

Soon Vadbhag Singh comes to the conclusion that only *simran*, remembering of the divine name, can relieve the suffering. In one day he assigns all social obligations to his wife Bibi Bhani and takes a vow to perform worship as a hermit. With a mattress, a standard, a horse and a parrot in a cage he departs for the Darshani passage in the mountainous area. After a bath in a river he finds a jujube tree under which he places his seat and sets up his standard beside it. Under this tree a total of three episodes are enacted. First of all Vadbhag Singh acquires the auspicious sight of God and receives a divine sanction for his mission:

The respected Timeless Creator gave *darshan* to Baba ji and said:

- Brother, because of what have you come to this place and what is your wish by doing worship?

Baba ji said:

- Kindly you gave *darshan* to me, I do not wish anything more. I have just come here for the welfare of the sad world.

The Lord Creator Benefactor ji said:

- From today your devotion became verified in the house of *Vahiguru*. As long as this world will exist, your name will shine and also whoever comes to your door with reverence, his/her wish will come true.<sup>700</sup>

Vadbhag Singh falls asleep in the shadow of the tree. From a distance a shepherd boy descries him and becomes frightened at the sight, as the boy knows that a fearsome ghost resides in the tree. The shepherd wakes him up to warn him, but the hermit calmly explains that no ghost can scare a person who does *simran* of the divine name. As the shepherd anxiously hurries home the horrible ghost, Nahar Singh Bir, appears and causes a terrible storm, a typhoon and thunder, to frighten the hermit off from his ghostly abode. By means of reciting two verses from Guru Granth Sahib,<sup>701</sup> Vadbhag Singh creates a *ramkar*, a sacred circle protecting him from the ghost attack. When Nahar Singh Bir realizes that the hermit will not leave his place, the ghost flies into a rage and brings an army of a hundred thousand of ghosts to assail him. But every ghost who enters the *ramkar* is reduced to ashes when Vadbhag Singh again recites two more *gurbani* hymns.<sup>702</sup> In fear the ghosts retreat and ask him from a distance to fight with them. While reciting *gurbani*, Vadbhag Singh takes water from a hollow gourd and sprinkles the ghosts, whose power promptly vanishes. The ghosts

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<sup>700</sup> *Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi*, p. 58 – 59.

<sup>701</sup> GGS: 677, 819. The latter hymn of Guru Arjan contains the metaphor of a protective circle which provides divine protection.

<sup>702</sup> GGS: 6, 749 – 750.

become silent and run away, while Vadbhag Singh transforms Nahar Singh Bir to a small child and captures him in a cage. The story explicates that this kind of power can be evoked from devotion.

In his imprisonment, Nahar Singh Bir now regrets his deeds and asks for forgiveness by respectfully folding his hands and pulling his own ears in shame. Vadbhag Singh first suspects that the ghost is deceiving him and sentences him to death, but kindness comes to him and he says:

- Brother, if you approve of my conditions then I will forgive your faults. First of all my order is this: from today you become my Sikh, never pain the heart of any living creature and do *seva* for the congregation of true people. Every year the congregation will come here and the living beings who have forgotten the Name will be enclosed by *bhutpret, jadutona, taviz, masan* etc. If there is any other thing of damage in them, then all the things in them you will catch, because you are the sovereign of *bhutpret, dio, pari, taviz, saman, chal chalindar, jadutona, jin jan* etc. Therefore I entrust this *seva* to you. Every year you will have to come and do *seva* to the congregation. If you approve of these conditions, that the greatest *pir* of ghosts is Suleman, after swearing an oath to him, make a true promise to me and I will let you out.<sup>703</sup>

Nahar Singh Bir agrees to these conditions and after swearing an oath he is released from the cage. To free Nahar Singh Bir from his ghost-birth Vadbhag Singh gives him a lesson, or more correctly, reads a letter on the teaching of *gurbani*. By reading, listening and remembering this teaching the ghost will in due time find salvation. Vadbhag Singh orders him to dwell in the mountains but return annually during the *Holi* festival to help suffering people.

When the rumour spreads from house to house that a saint conquered the terrifying ghost and brought him on a righteous path, people start to celebrate the miracle and come in thousands to get *darshan* from Vadbhag Singh. In this exciting atmosphere he leaves his reclusive life and, for the welfare of people, reverts to preaching and teaching of *gurbani*. At the same time as Vadbhag Singh explains to his new followers that only God's shelter can destroy sadness, the narrative concisely elucidates the source of magic:

Baba ji did not have any magic [*jadu*], the magic was that from the mouth of Baba ji like sweet words the nectar of *gurbani* came out.<sup>704</sup>

Within a short time Vadbhag Singh's followers form a community of servants willing to help sad people by remembering the divine name. A gurdwara is constructed

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<sup>703</sup> *Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi*, p. 70.

<sup>704</sup> *Jivan Sakhi Baba Vadbhag Singh Ji Sodhi*, p. 75.



where Vadbhag Singh continues his service of giving teaching to the community until his wondrous death. One day whilst meditating Vadbhag Singh hears the voice of a sailor who is in distress at sea. To save the man's life Vadbhag Singh leaves his body for three days. He gives instructions to his servants to lock his body in a house and not cremate it. After Vadbhag Singh has left his mother comes to visit him but the servant who keeps guard refuses to let her in. The next day she forces the servant to unlock the doors and she becomes furious when she finds out that the dead body of her son has been lying there for more than a day without cremation. With the help of the mountain people she now arranges the cremation beside the jujube tree. When Vadbhag Singh returns from his mission he finds his own body in flames, but conceives it as an order from God. After taking a dip in the river he starts to recite *Japji Sahib* and when completing the last stanza he consigns himself to the fire. After his death Vadbhag Singh goes directly to his wife Bibi Bhani in Kartarpur, appears in her dreams to explain what has happened. His last words before leaving are "Guru's victory".

Besides telling the life and wonders of Vadbhag Singh, the *jivan-sakhi* also provides the history and descriptions of gurdwaras and shrines which have been erected on spots related to his deeds. This retelling is a discursive attempt to connect the mythologized past with contemporary ritual practices. The place of Vadbhag Singh in the mountain area outside the city of Una is still under the custodian of the Sodhi lineage and consists of a large temple complex with several shrines, gurdwaras, guest houses and a kitchen hall for visitors. The first stop for a visiting pilgrim is *Shri Charan Ganga ji* – a small waterfall at which the demon king Nahar Singh Bir is said to reside. When the possessed persons take a shower in this water their bodies start to shake. An open-aired shower was established at this place to work as a means to detect ghosts and spirits.

The most important site is undoubtedly *Gurdwara Shri Dehra Sahib* which claims to mark out the spot where Vadbhag occupied a "seat" under the jujube tree and subsequently mastered the demon king. A characteristic feature of this gurdwara is the *Nishan Sahib*, which is a large pole covered with cloth and in this particular context is considered to be a sacred manifestation of Vadbhag Singh and his power.<sup>705</sup> On the full-moon day the pole is washed, dressed in new cloth, and smeared with pleasant fragrances, and every third year the body of *Nishan Sahib* is replaced by a new tree from the nearby forest. Devotees should take *darshan* of the pole and sit down beside it for meditation. The ghost or evil spirit in those who are possessed will immediately start to "play" in the presence of the *Nishan Sahib* by forcing the afflicted persons to sway their untied hair, roll their eyes, and sometimes scream abuses. No healer or exorcist is involved in the exorcism but the power of Vadbhag Singh's seat and stan-

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<sup>705</sup> The worship of *Nishan Sahib* in the tradition of Vadbhag Singh are similar to cults in Punjabi folk religion, such as that of the serpent God *Gugga Jahar Pir*. In worship of *Gugga Jahar Pir* a large *Nishan* in bamboo and decorated with clothes and peacock feathers, is carried in procession through the villages and treated as a sacred form of the serpent God (Bhatti 2000: 75 – 76).

dard is believed to control and cast out the evil forces of the possessed bodies. Those who are cured and have had their wishes come true at this gurdwara will in return donate money and give threads, bangles, and colourful cloths to be tied around *Nishan Sahib*.



Religious souvenirs for sale at Baba Vadbhag Singh's *Dehra Sahib* in Himachal Pradesh

Another site within the temple complex is Vadbhag Singh's place of meditation (*tapasthan*) at *Gurdwara Manji Sahib*. This site also holds a *Nishan Sahib* of a smaller size and is known for staging *Akhand path* of Guru Granth Sahib, one after another, beside the main shrine. When I visited the gurdwara in 2004 I was requested to do *matha tekna* and sit a while before the seat of Vadbhag Singh. A Sikh attendant then placed a metal instrument shaped as a hand over my head and gently hit my skull with it three times. As I was told later by visiting clients, if any ghost, spirit, or bad affect from the evil eye was hiding in my body it would surface and start to play when struck by Vadbhag Singh's hand. I was fortunately free from troubles, but all were not so lucky. The young woman next in line to me sat down, untied her hair, and began to sway her head as soon as the metal hand touched her head. On the backside of the shrine a man possessed by a malicious ghost (*bhutpret*) was crawling back and forth, licking and spitting on the ground, and screaming abusive comments to visitors passing by. Relatives to these and other patients were assured not only of the existence in evil spirits and ghosts, but also the power and blessing of Vadbhag Singh's place to cast out the most severe kind of possession.

Annually, during the festival of Holi, the *Dehra Sahib* of Vadbhag Singh attracts thousands of devotees from all over Northern India for a celebration at a large fair. In

connection with this event Kuku ji in Varanasi organizes a two-week-long pilgrimage tour for old and new patients in Varanasi. The primary purpose of the journey is to bring people suffering from malignant spirit afflictions for treatment at Vadbhag Singh's place. Kuku ji said that the spirits caught in the bodies will automatically start to play within a radius of 15 km of the site due to the forceful power within this area. Another reason for the pilgrimage is to provide those already cured an opportunity to donate reciprocal gifts to the place from which the healing power has spring forth.<sup>706</sup> The family usually gives a promise to do this when the spirit leaves the afflicted body and order is restored. For Kuku ji himself a visit to Vadbhag Singh's place is a means to "refill" his own healing power.

#### KUKU JI'S THERAPY

"Repeat *Satnam, Satnam, Satnam, Vahiguru, Vahiguru, Vahiguru...*" While some fifty visitors are sitting in rows on the ground to share food distributed from the communal kitchen Kuku ji strolls between the rows of humans, repeatedly chanting and encouraging them to join in the singing of the above line. Every portion of vegetables, rice, and bread is to be accompanied by the name of God and call attention to the divine giver. Occasionally clients, eager to be given the healing *amrit*, interrupt Kuku ji by touching his feet. He prepares the nectar immediately on the spot and continues the repetitive chanting. It is a full-moon day at Paharia. In the small family gurdwara installed in the courtyard of Kuku ji's house all the assembled have performed *kirtan* of *gurbani* hymns for about two hours. A male devotee led the congregation in a reading of the text *Puranmashi Katha* with stories about Guru Nanak. The program concluded with the customary recitation of *Arti*, while a female attendant waved a dish with nine oil-lamps before the Guru Granth Sahib, followed by a reading of the *Ardas* and distribution of *prashad*. Since the morning visitors have arrived to receive healing nectar from Kuku ji. In acts of thanksgiving for wishes that have come true or a treatment which has cured them from spirit problems, they tie cloths around the three meter high *Nishan Sahib*, erected in the courtyard, and promise to sponsor an *Akhand path* and arrange for a public distribution of food.

The gurdwara may function as a symbolic representation of the divine agents invited and active in the ritual healing. The room of approximately ten square metres has a palpable centre with Guru Granth Sahib seated on a throne. A statue of *Shiva* –

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<sup>706</sup> A female informant, who had been on the pilgrimage, told me about the measures taken to prepare patients for the exorcism. Some of these preparations aim to bring forth the spirit. For instance, the patients are not allowed to take showers, change dresses, comb or tie the hair during the journey to *Dehra Sahib*. Nor should they wear any thread or bracelet with protective power. Other steps are taken to protect the possessed body. Spirits and ghosts are generally believed to be attracted to white food and sweets and the patients should avoid all eatables of this kind. When they return from the pilgrimage they are expected to perform a *chilla*, that is, remain in seclusion for a forty day long period during which they sleep on the ground and do not visit other people's houses.

Kuku ji's guarding deity – is installed on a shelf in front of the scripture just beside the entrance.<sup>707</sup> To the right a framed and garlanded poster from *Dehra Sahib* is hung up, portraying Vadbhag Singh and the significant sites at the pilgrimage centre. Below the poster a photograph of Mata ji is placed on a small stool. During gatherings such as on the full-moon day, Kuku ji usually sits on the floor below the portrait of his mother. Devotees are continually entering the gurdwara to do the customary *matha tekna*, present food-offerings, and then take the “dust” from the lower parts of the pictures and touch the feet of Kuku ji.

At his practice at Paharia Kuku ji diagnoses and treats ill people with symptoms of minor and major maladies. Visiting a healer (*ojha*) is often the last resort when no other means prevails. Patients suffering from serious ailments and diseases may have undergone unsuccessful medical treatments at different hospitals, while others have been refused medical care before they end up at Paharia. The most common troubles at Kuku ji's practice today are “minor” physical pains, such as fever, headache, stomachache and so on, but also troubles believed to be caused by spirits and the bad effect of the evil eye.

Exorcists and healers may have working relationships with a repertoire of deities and deified beings for aid, permission, and protection in their approaching tasks, while most seem to chose a particular divinity to be the essential power behind the work of casting out spirits. In the immediate situation of exorcism a standard prescription in the repertoire of a healer are the use of mantras and articles charged with spiritual power.<sup>708</sup> Being a Sikh operating in the tradition of Vadbhag Singh, Kuku ji asserts it is primarily the power from *Dehra Sahib*, the *mantra* he received from Mata ji, his devotion to God and continuous engagement in *gurbani* that maintain and make his healing power effective. To sanction a healing enterprise Kuku ji says he first must take permission from the highest God (*Vahiguru*). Before commencing any treatment he simply shuts his eyes and performs a short *simran*, which in his view is an act of complete surrender to the divine power. In a similar fashion he will also take permission from Mata ji by keeping her in mind (*dhyan lagana*).

Kuku ji asserts that the blessing he received from Mata ji gave him sufficient power to cure patients by the touch of his hands, however, only in combination with the recitations of verses from Guru Granth Sahib. The significant instrument he uses in the healing process is *gurbani* hymns, recited and transferred to different material objects like water, fruits, and oils to be ingested. Clients with troubles in court cases, for instance, he might advise to memorize particular verses from the Guru Granth Sahib which they should remember during the court procedures. In case an unex-

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<sup>707</sup> *Shiva*, the lord of Ghosts and lord of Death in some of his manifestations, is Kuku ji's personal deity and his main protector. As he explained, *Shiva* is the God of *Triloki* – the sky, the earth and the underworld – and can “cut off” all problems he confronts and the deity also “comes” to him for protection. For a healer, labouring with a large number of spirits, it is considered essential to have access to a protector deity, especially in cases where he has to transmit torments of clients to his own body.

<sup>708</sup> Coccari 1986, Dwyer 2003.

pected decline in a business is suspected of being caused by the evil eye, he will give a lime fruit to hang in the shop as protection and recommend the owner to recite *gurbani* verses for a fixed period of time.

The most common ritual instrument used for physical and mental ailments is *amrit* imbued with *gurbani* verses. By reciting selected hymns from the Sikh scripture over water Kuku ji says he “medicates” the water which is transformed into nectar with the potential to heal, protect and purify the suffering body. This *amrit* can be prepared anywhere and only requires clean water and a receptacle of any kind, like a glass or bottle, which the clients should bring with them. When preparing nectar water Kuku ji may recite a specific *shabad* three times and after that shakes, blows or stirs the water with his right forefinger to make the fluid fully imbued with *gurbani*. The whole procedure is performed in a couple of minutes. The clients may drink the substance immediately or mix a few drops with the ordinary drinking water. Kuku ji will instruct them to keep the *amrit* in a safe and high up place at the house and always touch it with clean hands. Before any consumption of the healing water the client should remember God and sometimes recite *gurbani* verses. On special occasions, like the full-moon day, Kuku ji sometimes distributes nectar-water to all visitors along with the communal meal. To prepare a large quantity of *amrit* he takes out a glass of water from the family’s household reservoir, recites *gurbani* over it, and then pours the fluid back. All water in the tank is thereby converted to a favorable *amrit*.

Barrenness make up a great deal of the cases at Kuku ji’s practice and it is usually the women who seek help and are treated for infertility. In these cases water is exchanged for fruits such as mango, apple and guava depending on the season. In the same way as the preparation of *amrit* Kuku ji medicates the fruit with *gurbani* for ingestion. The woman is advised to carefully keep the fruit in her *amcal*, the hem or end of the sari that covers the breasts of the wearer, and at sunrise eat the complete fruit with pulp, pip and peel.<sup>709</sup>

Kuku ji claims that the particular *gurbani* hymn he employs in a healing situation comes to him by divine support. One hymn which he frequently used and attributed power to relieve all physical problems was the previously quoted composition of Guru Arjan in the measure *Bilawal* (See 3.1. in this Chapter). All kinds of bodily problems can be cured by drinking the nectar of this hymn or by touching the aching body part while reciting, he said. The choice of this particular composition again illustrates the tendency to ascribe excerpts from the Sikh scripture perlocutionary effects when texts are ritually performed. In one line of the mentioned *gurbani* hymn Guru Arjan writes: “He [the perfect Guru] has given me the medicine of the Lord’s name and I have enshrined love for the One Lord.”<sup>710</sup> In the healing situation the hymn which contains the word medicine is attributed agentive power to cure suffering patients. The notion that recitations of *gurbani* evoke divine protection and work

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<sup>709</sup> The mango pip is too big to swallow and should instead be buried.

<sup>710</sup> GGS: 819.

as a powerful remedy for diseases and problems caused by spirits or ghosts lies at the core of Kuku ji's practice and the healing tradition of Vadbhag Singh.

Treatments of spirit possession usually need the assistance of longer compositions in the Guru Granth Sahib. Kuku ji may prescribe a forty-days-long recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib*, which the close relatives of the patient can conduct at the house. During the same period the family of the afflicted is requested to observe a high level of purity in the house by controlling social interactions, keeping a vegetarian diet, and avoiding all sorts of intoxicants. The afflicted patient should remain at home for forty days, sleep on the ground, stay away from all pollutions acquired from being in a crowd, and not accept food prepared by others outside the household. The temporary lifestyle is a measure to protect the patient, since ghosts and spirits are in general attracted to impure places and things. It is also an attempt to remove all forms of contagions that generally afflict human conditions in order to make the treatment of *gurbani* more efficacious.

In a study of popular cultures in the Punjab, Bhatti has argued that folk religion functions as an anti-structure to the more defined and dominant religious system and is characterized by pragmatic attitudes since the primary aim is to alleviate immediate problems or needs.<sup>711</sup> In critical situations, people seek references and help outside their own religious boundaries. But in the lived reality the scholarly distinction between "folk" religion and dominant "elite" religion is not necessarily as watertight as it appears to be, especially in consideration of the practices people observe. Although the local healing practice at Paharia is frequently submitted to debates, and is by some considered fraudulent, the fact remains that many Sikhs have consulted Kuku ji (or his mother) when they have been in desperate life situations and suspected the involvement of supernatural forces. Why they went to Kuku ji and not to other local healers in Varanasi was because he belongs to a Sikh healing tradition and only uses *gurbani* as the primary source of power and working instrument. Some informants who openly criticized Kuku ji's practice still gave him credit for making people take interest in the Guru Granth Sahib by prescribing recitations of *gurbani* verses and regularly organizing *Akhand path* and *kirtan* programs. What is contested and negotiated is these discourses are not so much the methods of his healing but the doubts and disbeliefs in the causes of afflictions. Other Sikhs more sympathetic to Kuku ji's practice will perceive him as a knowledgeable guide. The significant point of reference between the healer and his clients is *gurbani*: Kuku ji receives healing power from immersions in *gurbani*; he operates within a tradition which uses *gurbani* as the primary means of healing and he encourages people to engage in *gurbani*. Both the tradition of Vadbhag Singh and Kuku ji's healing practice rest on a presupposition of the Guru's agentive power whenever the verses of the Guru Granth Sahib are evoked in recitations. From this perspective, the Sikh healing practice presents a different context, but otherwise merely clarifies perceptions and practices that already exist in the normative Sikhism.

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<sup>711</sup> Bhatti 2000, and personal conversation with author at Chandigarh, 2004-07-27.

## FIVE



### CONSTRUCTING MEANINGS

#### CONTEXTUALIZING WORDS AND ACTS

In the previous chapters I have attempted to illustrate how local conceptions of the Guru – the spiritual teacher and teaching standing between humans and God – presume the notion of divine words, revealed by the utterances of ten human messengers in a line of succession, which the Guru Granth Sahib continues to mediate. Although most Sikhs will make an epistemological distinction between the Word of God (*shabad*) and the utterances of human messengers (*gurbani*) recorded in Guru Granth Sahib, the ontological difference involves merely a process of progression of words, from a subtle divine source to the material form in a written scripture, which can be perceived by human senses. The tradition strongly stresses the spiritual unity of the ten historical Gurus, whose total knowledge and revelatory experiences were perpetually embodied in the Sikh scripture. Since the scripture succeeded to the office of the Guru and became Guru Granth Sahib, contemporary Sikhs have expressed a tripartite notion of the scripture as a holy text enfolding the Gurus' teaching and manifesting divine words, at the same time as the scripture is the worldly Guru with agency to mediate words and knowledge to curtail the ontological gap between humans and the invisible God.

When local Sikhs discursively explicate their worship in public and private spheres, the intricate conceptions of the Guru are ever-present and to some extent determine emic categorizations of religious action. The daily ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib, the solemnized transportation, and the final cremation ceremony of old texts, stage the Sikh scripture as a royal sovereign to be worshipped. The religious acts taking place during these events are presented as acts of veneration to the manifested form (*sarup*) of the Guru. Even when the Sikhs commemorate their historical human Gurus during festivals it is the present worldly form of the Guru – the scripture – that will be taken out in procession to be honored and grant blessings to the city and devotees. Other celebrations which imply social transfers in the individual Sikh life, such as turban ceremonies and weddings, are events during which the Guru comes to play a significant role in the social group and human society. The Sikhs arrange spaces for the physical scripture and read and sing from the sacred text as if the worldly Guru would be present to witness and bless the social occasion with utterances. "Whatever we do, we do in front of Guru Maharaj ji," a Sikh man said while he was explaining these types of ceremonies. Simultaneously the concentric setting of Guru Granth Sahib in the gurdwara and the different worship acts of ren-

dering *gurbani* always underscore that what should be the ultimate object of veneration is not merely scriptural corpus but the words and teaching within the text. By hearing and learning this teaching people are able to experience the Guru. The Sikhs would thus say there are religious acts which aim to honor the worldly Guru and ceremonies in which the Guru Granth Sahib assumes a significant social role. There are also worship acts which bring out and manifest the eternal Guru – the divine words and teaching enshrined in the scripture. From an analytical viewpoint I have argued that many of these religious acts do not merely communicate messages about individual or collectively shared conceptions of a sacred text, but the ritual enactments also mould meanings, values, and ideologies of the same.

In this concluding part I will dwell on a few theoretical ideas concerning meanings of religious worship acts, and especially those acts which involve renditions of *gurbani*. The chapter starts from the general theoretical assumption that meanings are not inherent qualities of ritual acts but created by humans out of contextual elements. People perform acts in particular situational settings and have recourse to discourses that will comment upon or explain the meanings of their worship. While some of these meanings are highly stipulated by the tradition and collectively shared, others are always open for individual invention. The chapter aims at illustrating a few processes by which Sikhs contextualize acts and words in performance and make their worship meaningful in many different ways by resorting to religious discourses, the sacred texts, the tradition, and the social circumstances surrounding their acts. The theoretical discussion will also pay special attention to the formal features of religious performances. When sacred texts move into performance and become linguistic acts, they assume a number of formal properties which create new interpretative frameworks. In this case the formalized performances of Guru Granth Sahib and other *gurbani* texts emphasize that the words rendered are not human speech but much grander utterances of otherworldly sources. The performative enactment of these words, according to agreed conventions, does not only serve to communicate written words in more aesthetically appealing ways, but is believed to evoke powerful forces that accomplish spiritual, material and social effects in the human world.

## 5.1. SEARCHING FOR MEANINGS

The scholarly study of ritual practices has already, from its inception in the nineteenth century, maintained the interest in meanings and functions of formalized acts. By studying rituals from different theoretical angles scholars have been particularly concerned with the reasons why people of different cultures continue to engage themselves in these activities. How do rituals work? What does religious action accomplish in the social world? What are the effects and functions of performing ritual acts? Within the different theoretical “schools” of symbolists, structuralists and functionalists, a large number of research studies have proposed analytic constructs to the



interpretation of activities defined and categorized as rituals.<sup>712</sup> Typical of scholars operating within the first two traditions was a search for different levels of meanings of ritual practices, that is, what shared values and notions are expressed in symbols and symbolic acts and how do these meanings correspond to patterns in the larger society and even conduce a persistence of social order. Functionalists, on the other hand, have been more inclined towards studies of the social utility of rituals, that is, the ways by which rituals affect social groups and societies at large, even civilizations, and contribute to the functioning of social systems. In the anthropological search for meanings religious practices have frequently been defined and interpreted from the social and psychological functions they might accomplish, or the ideas, concepts, and values the practices are believed to communicate.

During the last decades, anthropologists and ritual theorists have come to question the assumption that all individuals share a blueprint of meanings regarding actions termed as ritual. Do people have common understandings of ritual enactments? Since people often fail to express clear-cut ideas, functions, and purposes of ritual action and provide alternative explanations, are meanings and religious beliefs intrinsic to the identity of ritual? Based on a study of Brahmin rituals in India, Staal (1979) proposed his much debated theory about the “meaninglessness” of ritual acts. Staal observed that verses derived from the Vedas were subjected to formal rules and turned into highly stylized mantras or sounds which the religious specialists would carefully and faultlessly recite quite ignorant of their meanings.<sup>713</sup> Unlike everyday language, utterances of religious language turned into pure acts that were essentially rule-governed and devoid of referential content. From this observation Staal argued that symbolists and functionalists were wrong in their premise that rituals are expressions of beliefs and values, since rituals are not meant to communicate anything. His theory was still a product of the semantic-directed approach to rituals which he questioned: it was only when Staal found Vedic rituals to be self-referential and not involving references to some other external reality that he proposed that rituals are “meaningless”.

In their attempt to define the qualities which identify ritualized acts, Humphrey & Laidlaw (1994) strongly argue that the paradigm of rituals is not the expression of a single culture model or symbolic codes. People may unite in the performance of ritual acts even if their beliefs and ideas for the conduct are incomplete or even contradictory. The link between purposes and the enactment of rituals becomes more or less arbitrary, simply because ritualized acts have assumed a stipulated quality and are thereby open for the assimilation of a variety of interpretations and meanings. As Humphrey & Laidlaw purport, no theory or meaning is in fact necessary for conducting ritual acts and people continue to do so with a variety of purposes, meanings and interpretations (or none at all) in mind. The advantage of Humphrey & Laidlaw’s theory is their analytical distinction between the different elements which constitute

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<sup>712</sup> For an overview, see Bell 1997.

<sup>713</sup> Staal 1979.

ritual acts and that they actually provide a model which can explain the tendency among religious worshippers to give multiple explanations to ritual performances.

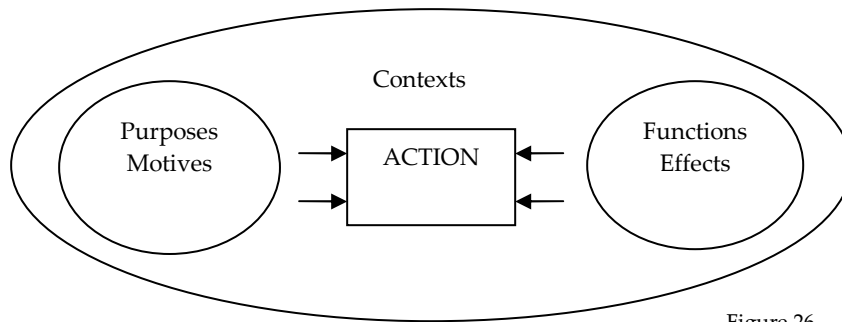


Figure 26.

Consider for a while the Sikh man who arranges a reading of *Ardas* in the gurdwara. He may verbally state it is for the purpose of having his newly opened shop blessed by the Guru and because he is the head of the family responsible for public worship. His prior motive may be to run the new business at a profit and earn money so that he can eventually afford to buy a new home for his family. His stated purpose may include religious ideas about the Guru's power and agency, that is, the purpose contains ideas of expected functions and concrete effects that a reading of the Sikh prayer is believed to accomplish in the social world. Irrespective of his motives and purposes the actual performance of *Ardas* is yet conducted in a stipulated manner. If the man says he performs the *Ardas* to have his new shop blessed by the Guru, the same purpose could also apply to other worship acts, like an unbroken recitation of Guru Granth Sahib or other types of *gurbani* recitations. The religious actor may attribute both personal and collective purposes and motives to stipulated acts that are derived from a variety of contextual elements (See Figure 26). The prior intentions and motives of religious action should not be analytically confused with the consequences of the act, even if the expected effects and results of action often conflate and are a part of the prior purpose by pointing to one and the same thing. When the Sikh man states he reads the *Ardas* to gain the Guru's blessings for his shop, both his purpose and desired results from the reading is that his business will actually be blessed with success in the future. Just as socio-linguistics have looked for meanings of speech in conventions and motivations outside the utterances, meanings are thus not a treasure to be found if we just dig deep enough into the ritual structure. Rather, meanings are contextual constructs that lie in human discourses on the outside of

action.<sup>714</sup> These constructs may involve interpretations of religious beliefs, conceptions, and values that people superimpose on action. In the search for meanings of ritualized acts one must attend the processes of making and drawing divergent meanings from the world around.

Humphrey & Laidlaw specify two levels of imputed meanings: individual purposes and social purposes that are shared by people. The actors may have conscious and unconscious reasons for conducting certain acts and actively search for interpretations. On an individual level people often (but far from always) feel impelled to look for symbolic and other meanings to apprehend the action performed. In verbal statements they negotiate their reasons and explanations for engaging in these acts and thereby link action to a multitude of possible meanings. There may also be an authoritative (oral and written) tradition, sustained by learned specialists, which propagates and institutionalizes public meanings, goals, and theories of ritual conducts. Rituals can be buttressed by centuries of exegetical traditions that aim to explain the meanings of the practice. Humphrey & Laidlaw maintain that individual and social purposes often have different cognitive qualities: socially held aims are more often expositions of theological points which specialists attempt to tie down to particular action, whereas people's own purposes for performing rituals are only partly aligned with these conventional motives.<sup>715</sup> What people do when they link a particular belief with action is that they represent an idea to themselves and to others.

In the Sikh tradition, the written code of conduct (*Sikh Rahit Maryada*) is a modern attempt to specify the religious behavior required of all faithful Sikhs. The manual presents a collection of publicly acknowledged ceremonies by which Sikhs should celebrate a new-born child, contract a juridical marriage, bid farewell to deceased family members, and become a member of the Khalsa community. The *Sikh Rahit Maryada* presumes a conventional understanding of the social effects of fulfilling these ceremonies. Local Sikhs in Varanasi will notice that there is only one way to get married according to Sikh customs: the man and woman who are joined together in wedlock must make four circumambulations around the Guru Granth Sahib to the tune of the *gurbani* composition *Char lavan*. The obvious social effects of the performance on both an individual and structural level are the couple's unification in a legal and morally valid marriage and the transformation of their social status to husband and wife. The Sikh tradition has already stipulated the formal procedure and the social effects which can be expected from a wedding. The bridal couple needs merely to confirm to pre-existing conventions by committing to the constitutive rules of the

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<sup>714</sup> A discourse is a concept which places people's actions on an abstract level, as floating over, enveloping, and directing acts in order to explain individual or social expressions. In Habbe's definition, a discourse is language and acts that are structured according to particular ideological patterns which our statements and acts comply with when we act in different social and epistemological domains. Each of these ideologically meaningful patterns can be called a discourse (Habbe 2005: 71).

<sup>715</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 185 – 186.

acts and accept the conventional effects which will transform their social identity.<sup>716</sup> Since the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* does not provide comprehensive interpretations of symbolic meanings of ceremonies, local Sikhs will search for meanings elsewhere, in oral and written stories about the historical Sikh Gurus and particularly doctrinal treatises on the teaching in Guru Granth Sahib. In connection with a wedding, the bridal couple, family members, or other participants may present personal motives and meanings to the ritual acts,<sup>717</sup> but these discursive elaborations will not affect the stipulated form of the wedding ceremony or its collectively agreed social functions. The bride and groom are still considered married after circulating four times around the Guru Granth Sahib whether they have prior intentions to unite with a lover, establish relations with a reputed family, or merely satisfy the will of elders. As a social consequence the wedding establishes new kinship ties that will regulate interactions between old and new relatives in the social life and ceremonies to follow. The wedding ceremony, like many other shared events in the Sikh religious life, is thus enveloped in consensual understanding of the social effects of the performance. The acts have already been attributed stipulated functions to accomplish something in the world, that is, transform the social identity of individuals and determine future relations between the two families.

Stipulated motives and effects may apply to certain acts but far from all. Those ceremonies which, by the authoritative tradition, are considered important to a Sikh way of life are sustained by collectively shared meanings, while other religious acts display no general consensus and may be open for multifarious and sometimes conflicting interpretations. One reason for the nuances of interpretations is that Sikh practices are embedded in multi-vocal discourses within the culture to which they belong. Commentaries in textual and oral traditions in the culture provide images and ideas that individuals have access to and draw upon with varying degrees. Action thus becomes a screen upon which people may project a number of meanings and functions on an individual and institutional level. While some of these meanings appear to be enduringly conventional in a society, others are constantly exposed to inventive change. It still remains that human action becomes meaningful when placed and interpreted by people in a social and interactive setting of some kind; it is contextual elements which provide meanings to action.

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<sup>716</sup> Focussing exclusively on the meta-communicative dynamics of rituals, Rappaport (1999) notes that all religions do not require their worshippers to share beliefs surrounding ritual acts, but encourage them to accept and confirm to a public liturgical (or ritual) order. People's participation in rituals constitutes the acceptance of this order regardless of their private states of affairs.

<sup>717</sup> During the wedding ceremony the *granthi* or *ragi* performers will elaborate the spiritual and symbolic meanings of the conjugal meeting between man and woman from interpretations of *Char lavan* and other *gurbani* hymns.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ENTEXTUALIZATION

To say that meanings of formalized human action is constructed and derived from a context does, however, involve a problem of definition and the methodological challenge to determine the elements which possibly could constitute a particular context. Anthropologists and others with larger social fields in view have often organized their data around a wide range of different categories of contexts. Today there appears to be as many meanings as there are applications of the word context – all from “situational context” to “cultural context”. As Duranti & Goodwin (1993) observe, the word context has assumed divergent meanings within different research paradigms and there is no single definition of the word. A term like “cultural context” probably provides one of the broadest frameworks of interpretation since it may, in fact, comprise most aspects of human culture, including belief systems, norms, history, languages, practices, etc., that a group of people within a geographical area are believed to share. To simply say that Sikhs in Varanasi, for instance, are influenced by their cultural context will entail a selection and simplification of a few stereotypical features, among a wide range of other elements that make up the local culture. Briggs correctly remarks that the concept of context carries the two problems of inclusiveness and false objectivity.<sup>718</sup> Definitions of contexts easily become too inclusive, because the ways to describe elements and factors surrounding a phenomenon or an event are endless. Descriptions will therefore be based on the researcher’s own judgment of what he or she think should be included, a selection that reflects false objectivity.

In a move away from static and object-centred notions of context, a rapidly growing body of work in anthropology and linguistics has shifted the focus from contexts towards *contextualization*, that is, the ongoing processes by which interpretive frameworks more situationally emerge among participants. In pragmatic linguistics Bateson’s notions of how people “frame” behaviors and Goffman’s analysis of the “footing” of speech have considerably helped scholars to develop more dynamic definitions of contexts.<sup>719</sup> In analyses of conversations, Gumperz (1982) argues that contextualization is a meta-level process that surfaces in negotiations between interacting speakers. This process can be recognized by turning to the different “contextualization cues”, which Gumperz defines as “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions.”<sup>720</sup> For instance, a gesture or a rising intonation in speech (e.g., raising a finger while saying “no”) invokes interpretative frames by which contextually appropriate process of inference can take place (e.g., the addressee understands the speaker as forbidding or denying something). Contextualization cues become the speaker’s strategic resources to communicate a variety of messages by shifting frames.

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<sup>718</sup> Briggs 1988: 13.

<sup>719</sup> Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974.

<sup>720</sup> Gumperz 1982: 131.

From this perspective “the context” signifies situational and shifting alignments of speech to interpretative and inferential processes that allow speakers to ratify discourses. According to Bauman & Briggs (1990), the discipline of performance studies should have as its main task the highlighting of similar “poetically patterned contextualization cues” in performance. The shift from context to contextualization can make performance-based analyses more textually and contextually focused:

In order to avoid reifying “the context” it is necessary to study the textual details that illuminate the manner in which participants are collectively constructing the world around them. On the other hand, attempts to identify the meaning of texts, performances, or entire genres in terms of purely symbolic, context-free content disregard the multiplicity of indexical connections that enable verbal art to transform, not simply reflect, social life. [...] The shift we identify here represents a major step towards achieving an agent-centered view of performance. Contextualization involves an active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself.<sup>721</sup>

Instead of viewing context as a set of external conditions independent from the event or phenomenon under study, contextualization is an interactive meta-level process by which participants orient themselves towards meanings. People shape both formal and meta-narrative devices that provide interpretative frames of their actions.

While linguistic practices assume form, function, and meaning when they contextualize in performance, scholars have also observed that the textual elements of performance – narratives, spells, discourses – are treated as self-contained objects detached from the situational context. With the growing scholarly interest for the ways by which transformation of contexts occur, linguistics anthropologists have identified and developed the notions of two dialogic contextualization processes which they call “entextualization” and “recontextualization”. Bauman & Briggs define entextualization as the “process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable.”<sup>722</sup> It is a process that makes discourses detachable from the immediate context by transforming them into coherent and autonomous oral or written texts. The more detachable the text is made, the more it will be perceived to remain constant, shareable, and transmittable across different temporal and spatial borders.<sup>723</sup> En-

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<sup>721</sup> Bauman & Briggs 1990: 69.

<sup>722</sup> Bauman & Briggs 1990: 73. Silverstein & Urban even suggest that culture can be viewed as a structured process of entextualization which consists of discourses and utterances already shared by people (Silverstein & Urban 1996: 21).

<sup>723</sup> Urban 1991.

textualization can be achieved through formal and meta-pragmatic devices that are manifested in the performance of the text. For instance, the use of reported speech or quotations in story-telling – religious or secular – is an explicit strategy to separate the text from the immediate social contexts of listeners and the story-telling as well. In addition to this, ritual theorists would probably also add that nonverbal ritual behaviour, which has assumed a stipulated character, appears with a similar entextualized identity of being already made, detachable, and socially shareable, independent of changing situational influences.

Since the detachment of a text (or ritualized act) from one interactive setting usually implies that it will be re-situated in another, recontextualization is the other process.<sup>724</sup> The recognition of a stretch of speech as having an independent existence involves a re-embedding of it in a specific way that mobilizes discursive elements. In the Sikh world the Guru Granth Sahib and other *gurbani* texts come out with a clear entextualized character. Whenever the Sikhs are reciting the Gurus' utterances as quotations uttered in a particular social setting, an instance of recontextualization occurs. Because linguistic and paralinguistic acts are always moving in and out of different social frameworks, entextualization and recontextualization can be viewed as two inseparable and mutually transformational aspects of the same process. When the contextualization process involves religious language and texts it can also be interpreted as evoking a divine presence. As Keane (1997) suggests: "When scripture is believed to report the actual words of a divine revelation, the act of reading aloud effectively closes the circuit from utterance in context to written text and back to utterance again. To the extent that a scriptural text merges with a context, it can be taken as making divinity present."<sup>725</sup>

### MEDIATING WORDS

That local Sikhs believe the different worship acts have a primary function to communicate (noteworthy from the Latin word *communicare* – "to make common") an eternal and true teaching through the mediating agency of Guru Granth Sahib, appears to stand as an undeniable fact. The worship acts are modes to reproduce divine messages through recitations (*path*) and devotional singing (*kirtan*). These messages will be explicated and interpreted in oral discourses (*katha*) in order to comprehend subtler meanings and accommodate the Guru's teaching to contemporary human conditions. The divine name and knowledge should be repeated and reflected upon in the human interior (*simran*) and expressed in actions (*seva*) that will benefit others in the social world. Altogether the different means of engaging in *gurbani* establish a continued revelation of a teaching that should be incorporated into people's minds, hearts, bodies, and deeds; they constitute a spiritual discipline to communicate, make manifest, and act out a divine plan in the social world for and together with others.

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<sup>724</sup> Bauman & Briggs 1990: 74.

<sup>725</sup> Keane 1997a: 63.

The living *katha* traditions, upheld by oral exegetes and musicians, strongly emphasize that Sikhs should read, listen, interpret, and continually dwell on the semantic dimensions of Guru Granth Sahib to develop understanding and insights of the Guru's spiritual guidance. Recitations, singing and readings of *gurbani* hymns are always to follow prescribed formal rules because the words rendered are believed to be of suprahuman origin. Still the endless range of spiritual meanings in the Guru Granth Sahib are of greatest significance to a Sikh way of life and the ideal Sikh should always attempt to comprehend the referential content of what he or she is reciting.

Sikh propagandists in India and the Diaspora occasionally bring up true devotion and comprehension of the Guru's teaching in Guru Granth Sahib for public debate.<sup>726</sup> In these discourses semantic understanding of the sacred text is often contrasted with ritual practices. In Varanasi visiting propagandists from the Punjab would comment upon the presence of *karam kand*, or "ritualism" or "rituals" in the city. In their use of the term it signified the extent of ritual activities in a Hindu pilgrimage center and the "meaninglessness" of rituals which, both in content and form, were contradictory to the normative Sikh code of conduct, particularly Hindu customs which people continued to observe by family or caste tradition. The propagandists would also direct harsh criticism toward some Sikh practices which in their view had fallen into error due to ritualization. A recurrent topic was the common practice to purchase performances of *Akhand path* that are carried out by specialists in absence of the sponsor and at such a brisk pace that people are not able to understand the words recited. A local propagandist asserted the modern increase of religious activities among the Sikhs has been accompanied with a shift away from direct participation in worship: "When the *pathis* perform *Akhand path* the congregation is busy gossiping. While the *Akhand path* is going on in one room of the house, people will gather in another for watching TV," he said.

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<sup>726</sup> In a paper on ritual and identity, Nijhawan (2006a) observes how religious discourses in a Sikh gurdwara in Frankfurt have shifted from political concerns to matters related to pietism in the performance of rituals. When Sikh propagandists, working within trans-national networks, visited the local gurdwara their discourses were organized around the corruption of worship: Sikh practices have gone astray from the Guru's teaching to become devoid of inner commitment. Interestingly enough the *granthis*, responsible for the daily duties in the gurdwara, met the propaganda with little interest. The reason for this, Nijhawan suggests, was related to the fact that the rituals under criticism contributed significantly to the process of establishing a local community: in a scattered Diaspora the organization of rituals has the force to tie people together in collective representations and provide the required resources to maintain the community. According to Nijhawan the discrepancy between the different orientations – Sikh reformists propagating internal matters and local Sikhs trying to secure resources of identity and representations – has created a cleavage in the Sikh community (Nijhawan 2006a). The Frankfurt case demonstrates an instance of negotiation between two common emic approaches to ritual, text and religion: propagandists who stress orthodoxy – correct beliefs in religious doctrines – and seek to maintain the sense of a coherent teaching and tradition, while local Sikhs meet these discourses with more pragmatic and reflexive attitudes.



Another discourse somewhat relevant to the discussion here is the controversy over the use of translated versions of Guru Granth Sahib in the Sikh worship. A major challenge for Sikh communities in the Diaspora is what to do with the fact that the younger generations do not have sufficient knowledge to read and understand Punjabi and the Gurmukhi script. Since text recitation is so fundamental to the Sikh religious life people have feared that the linguistic barriers will cause major implications for future developments in the community. The Sikhs can continue to recite from the Guru Granth Sahib in the original language and script, with the possible result that the majority of worshippers do not understand what is being communicated. Another alternative, already in practice in many Diasporic communities, is to use Guru Granth Sahib in the original version for formal installations and recitations in the gurdwara, and *sanchis* translated into local vernaculars for comprehension.<sup>727</sup> Given the Sikh resistance to use translated versions of the scripture, reformists have questioned the validity of ritual acts prescribed by the authoritative tradition and warned the community about relapsing into bibliolatry. Contradictory to the Sikh teaching, the physical form of Guru Granth Sahib and not the teaching it contains, becomes the primary object of worship. Sikhs will revert to the idolatrous worship and mechanical repetitions of unintelligible sound, that is, Brahmin-like and “meaningless” practices which the human Sikh Gurus once so strongly objected.

What modern reformists do not always pay attention to when cautioning the community against bibliolatry is firstly the distinction between acts which aim to venerate the body-form of the present Guru and worship acts which are a means to engage in the sacred teaching within the scripture. In cases where individual Sikhs cannot read *gurbani*, but still do *matha tekna* before the Guru Granth Sahib and give the scripture a ministration similar to a honoured guest, does not automatically lead to the conclusion that Sikhs are involved in idolatrous worship of the sacred text. To most religious Sikhs the Guru Granth Sahib is not an icon, representing or resembling the Guru, but *is* the present form of the Guru which is invested authority and agency by the tradition. The dominant ideal is to intellectually understand the teaching enshrined in the scripture, but if the individual Sikh fails to do so the body-form of the Guru should still be revered, like the human Gurus once were, for what it contains and mediates.<sup>728</sup> Secondly, modernist discourses do not always take into consideration “culturally specific assumptions about the relations between language form and

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<sup>727</sup> Yet another modern way to provide semantic understanding of *gurbani* hymns recited in the gurdwara is to screen PowerPoint presentations with translations before the congregation while the *granthi* is reciting the texts.

<sup>728</sup> It should be noted that ritualized services are given to iconic or aniconic objects in other religious traditions that markedly condemn idolatry in theology and praxis. Even if orthodox Buddhist doctrines, for instance, discourage visual representations of the historical Buddha and emphasize his worldly absence after the release from samsaric bonds, monks and laypeople still wash, feed and present offerings to Buddha-images that have been consecrated through the eye-opening ceremony to express veneration to Buddha’s teaching and person. See e.g. Evers 1979, Gell 1998, Sharf 1999, Kinnard 1999.

function,"<sup>729</sup> and particularly the pragmatic functions which Sikhs may attribute worship acts that involve renditions of *gurbani*. Lay Sikhs are more inclined to speak about the gains they expect from devotional engagements in the sacred verses of Guru Granth Sahib, rather than occupying themselves with exegetical elaborations on the scriptural content. The content and form of *gurbani* is ontologically way beyond the level of humans, but as the supra-mundane words manifest in worship acts they are believed to bring about an infinite number of effects on human life, and even have power to change the properties of both time and space. From an analytical viewpoint, it would be possible to argue that these meta-pragmatic discourses reveal the existence of a "performativist language" ideology which does not only value what the sacred words are saying but also what they are capable of doing. When the sacred *gurbani* hymns move into performance they are attributed power and agency to accomplish things in the social world.

#### ACHIEVING THINGS BY WORDS

Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of studying semantic components as well as social functions of language, text, and speech. When Malinowski presented his theories on language during the first half of the twentieth century he perceived language more as a mode of action rather than a means of thinking. In his study of Trobriand gardening rituals Malinowski made a plea for the study of language within the actual context of usage and presented both the referential content of ritual speech and its relation to religious beliefs and sociological and ritual contexts.<sup>730</sup> It was however Austin's seminal collection of lectures called *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) that came to draw considerable attention to the ways by which language functions. According to Austin an utterance is not merely a way of communicating referential content, but an act that may achieve something in the social world. Austin distinguishes between "constatives", or statements that describe a situation or state of affairs and are capable of being true or false, and "performative utterances", which do not necessarily describe a situation and cannot be taken as true or false but do something rather than say something. Constatives and performatives are not to be seen as two radically different forms of utterances but different ways by which utterances operate – the former signifying things and the latter doing things.<sup>731</sup>

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<sup>729</sup> Keane 1997a: 57.

<sup>730</sup> Malinowski 1935.

<sup>731</sup> When Austin unfolded his speech theory he struggled with the opposition between constatives and performatives. After closer scrutiny he discovered that all constatives, especially putative statements, do not drastically differ in character from performatives and therefore came to the conclusion that some speech acts do have the shared ability to both say something while doing something (Austin 1962: 136 – 139). The distinction between performatives and constatives are still useful for an analytical separation between the propositional content of texts in relation to their intended functions and uses.

As Austin argues, performative utterances produce results or effects on the listener when they are spoken in a specific situation and context. His examples of performatives include speech acts drawn from ceremonial, judicial and contractual speech act situations, such as inaugurations and weddings. For instance, when the bride in the course of a Christian wedding utters “I do” she actually agrees to take the man to be her lawful husband. The context is essential for the ability to generate effective speech and Austin offers a schematization of the conditions necessary for a felicitous speech performance: there must exist an accepted conventional procedure that has a certain conventional effect (e.g., “I do” voiced by man and woman within the context of a wedding ceremony); the particular person and circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation (e.g., only the bride and groom can say “I do” during a wedding); and the procedure must be executed correctly and completely (e.g., the bride cannot say “I do not” or only “I”). The failure to meet these conditions leads to a breakdown of the performative, in other words, it does not simply take place.

Austin continues to classify three different types of acts that determine different dimensions of sentence uses: locutionary acts, “which [are] roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense” – the semantic content of an utterance; illocutionary acts which are “utterances which have a certain (conventional) force” and perform acts through saying something; and finally perlocutionary acts, which is “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something”, in other words the consequence of saying the utterance.<sup>732</sup> For instance, when Sikhs are uttering the entextualized salutation “Sat Sri Akal” the locutionary meaning may point to a theological postulate about God’s ultimate nature and qualities (in this case that God is true (*sat*) and eternal (*akal*)), but if we understand the interactive setting in which the utterance contextualizes, we may either recognize the act as a greeting, a marker that ends a ceremony, or the congregation’s public approval of a decision or event that has just taken place. The propositional meaning of the utterance informs us on the qualities which Sikhs may attribute to the divine, but conventions are the sources of successful performance of a speech act and of its illocutionary force. Again, if my intention was to greet Sikh friends by uttering the phrase “Sat Sri Akal” in an ordinary social meeting, most would understand that the illocutionary force of my speech act is to greet since they belong to a Sikh culture and know the Punjabi language. But if I would use the same phrase for greeting my Swedish friends most would not understand it at all because the language and the cultural conventions for greeting acts in the Sikh culture are alien to them. In this sense, both the semantic aspects of language and the conventional rules of language use instruct us on what is appropriate or not in a given situational context in order to get it right.

In response to Austin’s work scholars came to revise the methodologies in speech act theory and paid considerable attention to the factors which determine illocutionary acts. Strawson (1964) first formulated the intentionalist approach which maintains that illocutionary acts only occur if the speaker has the properly corre-

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<sup>732</sup> Austin 1962: 109.

sponding intentions to enable the completion of the act.<sup>733</sup> To Searle (1965), on the other hand, illocutionary acts were primarily conventional in nature: “to perform illocutionary acts is to engage in a rule-governed form of behavior.”<sup>734</sup> As he emphasized, the illocutionary force can easily be misunderstood or lost if the speaker does not follow these rules. Similar to Austin’s classification of speech acts, Searle distinguished between propositional acts (referring and predicating), illocutionary acts (stating, questioning, commanding, etc.), and perlocutionary acts, which refer to the effects of illocutionary acts upon the listeners. In his view, utterances and sentences contain two major components: the propositional indicating element which can be judged true or false, and what he termed the “function illocutionary indicating device”.<sup>735</sup> The latter does not merely determine how an utterance can be interpreted but also designates the kind of illocutionary act which is being performed. As Searle exemplifies:

I may indicate the illocutionary act I am performing by beginning the sentence with ‘I apologize’, ‘I warn’, ‘I state’, etc. Often in actual speech situations the context will make clear what the illocutionary force of the utterance is, without it being necessary the function indicating device.<sup>736</sup>

Similar to Gumperz contextualization cues, the indicating device (such as “I state such-and-such”) becomes a key to understand a speech act since it constitutes the force of that act.

The application of speech act theory came to travel far beyond the field of linguistics. The basic notion that words do not merely communicate information about ideas and conditions in social world, but accomplish things in the world had a particularly strong appeal to anthropologists and folklorists. The original notion of performative utterances and illocutionary forces were applied early to ethnographies which aimed to demonstrate the essential functions of verbal acts to accomplish and transform social categories.<sup>737</sup> Studies from different parts of the world have suggested that modernization processes during the last centuries has entailed a “linguistic modernity”, which brought about a transition of language ideologies from indige-

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<sup>733</sup> Strawson 1964.

<sup>734</sup> Searle 1965.

<sup>735</sup> Searle 1969: 23. Searle distinguishes between two types of rules which create and define illocutionary acts: constitutive and regulative. Constitutive refers to the essential character of the illocutionary act which creates the field of action. It would be impossible for an act to take place if constitutive rules were not in operation. Regulative rules are not an essential feature of illocutionary acts, but define the proper conditions under which an act should be performed (Searle 1969: 34). Humphrey & Laidlaw build their theory of stipulated acts on Searle’s ideas of constructive rules, saying that constitutive rules establish the “ontology of acts” disconnected from the actor’s intentions (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 117).

<sup>736</sup> Searle 1965: 619.

<sup>737</sup> See e.g. Tambiah 1968 and Finnegan 1969.

nous “performativist” to the modern “referentialist” approach to language.<sup>738</sup> The former ideology views language as an effective means to present, constitute, and act upon the world. The modernist referentialist language ideology, on the other hand, emphasizes semantic meanings of language and disregards the performative aspects. Words “are mere symbols and signs, the purpose of which is to talk about a reality that lies beyond them and apart from them”.<sup>739</sup> Language uses became a matter of rational explications of texts rather than a means of presenting them in effective and powerful acts. Against the general assumption that modernity involves a linear transition from the performativist to the referentialist approach, Kang (2006) persuasively argues that the two language ideologies do not necessarily exclude one another but can be at work simultaneously, “interacting in different ways across different genres and contexts.”<sup>740</sup> Modernization does not entail a transfer from traditional performative to a rational approach to language and words, but involves “multifaceted processes of the change, in which local people intentionally choose and selectively employ different views of language according to genres and contexts.”<sup>741</sup>

In performance studies, speech act theory was also criticized for using idealized speech situations which presumed clear-cut correlations between speech acts and the forces they might signal. Bauman & Briggs (1990) emphasized that it is not merely semantic properties and grammatical structure of a few sentences that produce illocutionary forces, but several other formal and contextual elements of speech events:

Illocutionary forces can be conveyed by a host of elements from micro to macro and, most importantly, by the interaction of such features. The ethnography of communication, discourse analysis, and research on performance have all contributed to shifting the focus of research from isolated sentences and features to, in Austin’s terms, the total speech act.<sup>742</sup>

Illocutionary forces do not simply emerge from the mere pronouncement of a sentence in a certain situation or context. There is set of interrelated textual and contextual conditions that provide the infrastructure through which an utterance gains force as a particular type of action. When dealing with religious language, the model of speech act theory becomes even more complex. Unlike speech events created by human participants in a here-and-now context, religious speech frequently involves invisible agents and occurs in situations in which the ordinary face-to-face encounter is suspended. Performances of religious speech display a tension between the transcendence and the pragmatic present of linguistic practices, which allows otherwise

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<sup>738</sup> Kang 2006: 1.

<sup>739</sup> Rumsey 1990: 352.

<sup>740</sup> Kang 2006: 2. The “non-dualist language ideology” among the Sikhs has been discussed by Dusenbery 1992. See the discussion in Chapter 2.

<sup>741</sup> Kang 2006: 17.

<sup>742</sup> Bauman & Briggs 1990: 64.

non-perceptible beings to play a role and interact with people in the human world.<sup>743</sup> In other words, religious language practices involve the construction and attribution of a certain agency which is believed to provide practitioners access to supernatural powers. This partly explains why religious people pay great attention and care to the proper uses of words held sacred.

Speech act theory can, however, be useful to analyses of the more conventional aspects of verbal and non-verbal religious activities. Applying speech act theory to the study of rituals, Rappaport (1999) notes that “[R]ituals are full of conventional utterances and acts which achieve conventional effects” and there exists a special relationship between rituals and performatives.<sup>744</sup> The formal characteristics and correctness that is typical of ritual performances enhance the weight and success of performatives. The faults which could make performative acts invalid (e.g., reciting the wrong religious text in a liturgy) are unlikely to happen in rituals “because the formality of liturgical order helps to insure that whatever performatives they incorporate are performed by authorized people with respect to eligible persons or entities under proper circumstances in accordance with proper procedures.”<sup>745</sup> The ritualized form makes it possible to create meta-messages that are not necessarily informative in a lexical sense but convey a special type of information that can bring about stipulated messages and conventional effects among participants. As Ray (1973) correctly remarks, “the ‘performative’ approach enables us to see not only that language is the central mechanism of these rites, but also how the belief in the instrumentality of words (their causal ‘power’) may be intelligibly understood without consigning it to the sphere of the ‘primitive’, the ‘magical’, or the ‘symbolic’, as so frequently done.”<sup>746</sup> We cannot grasp the meanings of Sikh worship acts without recognizing both the identity of words and what is being done through the performative acts involved.

## 5.2. ANALYTICAL REFLECTIONS

In the search for meanings of religious worship acts, linguistic and paralinguistic, one must necessarily have to look at the single ritual performance. There will always be particular ways by which acts and texts contextualize in situational settings, to which people bring with them a number of individual and socially shared ideas about the meanings and effects of the performances. The following sections of this chapter will illustrate a few means by which Sikhs contextualize and assign their worship acts conventional and situational meanings that are derived from broader social events

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<sup>743</sup> Keane 1997a.

<sup>744</sup> Rappaport 1999: 114. He distinguished between “factives” which “bring into being the state of affairs with which they are concerned”, and “commissives” which “merely bring into being the commitment of those performing them to do so sometime in the future” (Rappaport 1999: 115).

<sup>745</sup> Rappaport 1999: 116.

<sup>746</sup> Ray 1973: 17.

and religious ceremonies, discourses on the referential content of *gurbani* texts, as well as the internal dynamics of ritual structures. On a general level one can notice that many worship acts in the Sikh life are performative acts that have been ascribed conventional effects to evoke and manifest the agency and presence of the Guru. The meanings of other formalized acts and ceremonies, on the other hand, are continually changing as the contextual and situational variables are shifting.

### MAKING AGENCY PRESENT

Religious practices among the Sikhs create and confirm assumptions about the powerful agency of the historical human Gurus, the worldly Guru manifested in Guru Granth Sahib, and the eternal Word-Guru dwelling within the scriptural pages. A significant prime illocution of many of these acts seems to be the presencing of the Guru's agency in a here and now context. The Sikhs are continually making this agency present through their words and acts, since it enables devotees to establish relationships to the Guru who/which has the power and authority to bring about interactions with the invisible divine.

### THE HUMAN GURUS

In the first chapter I discussed the ways by which contemporary Sikhs at Varanasi have created a meaningful history which stands as a counter-narrative to the predominant Hindu master narrative. The organization of sacred spaces, relics, visual representations of the historical human Gurus, and the ongoing re-telling of history, are means by which local Sikhs manifest the Gurus' presence and power at a particular location. Places and objects which can demonstrate a physical contact with the Gurus are believed to metonymically store their power, even hundreds of years after their death. Through acts of devotion to the Gurus' spaces and personal belongings, local Sikhs believe they can take part of and be affected by this enduring power in their social life.

The historical Gurus are also made present in commentaries on religious worship. The Sikhs can trace the origin and formal characteristics of major ceremonies to the time of the Gurus and claim that the form, content, and meaning of complete ritual sequences, or at least certain elements of ceremonies, were stipulated by the Gurus. The "evidence" hereof can be traced to exegetical discourses which interpret *gurbani* passages and historical writings about the life and deeds of the Gurus.<sup>747</sup>

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<sup>747</sup> For instance, when Baba Sundar, the great-grandson of Guru Amardas, in a composition called "The Call of Death" (GGS: 923 – 934) writes that the Guru summoned his followers and family to inform them on conducts after his death, the Guru's words (paraphrased by Baba Sundar) became normative instructions for behaviors that contemporary Sikhs should adapt at the time of a death. In other words, the Sikhs should not weep or perform Hindu rites, such as lighting lamps and offerings rice balls, but instead call in the learned scholars (*gopal pandit*) to deliver discourses on God (*harikatha*), read the story of God and hear the name of God. Since

Before mourners in Varanasi carry the dead body for cremation (described in Chapter 4), they will pay a visit to the gurdwara where the *granthi* opens the shrouding, pours Ganga amrit into the mouth of the dead, and then offers the deceased a robe of honor. When commenting upon these acts, local Sikhs may refer to archetypal acts prescribed by the Sikh Gurus. In a hymn Guru Nanak writes about the guru-oriented person who has imbibed the immortal nectar of the Word and content goes to the divine court dressed in a robe of honor. The textual reference connects two symbolic acts – the giving of nectar water and a robe of honor – with the destiny after death and thus can work as a model for contemporary ritual procedures prior to cremations.

Devotional activities which the human Gurus did in the past also provide paradigmatic models for what contemporary Sikhs should do. The Sikh narrative traditions, weaving stories about the life of Guru Nanak in the *janam-sakhi* literature and tales on the later Gurus in the *gurbilas* literature, are used as significant sources to specify Sikh worship. In Chapter 2 I mentioned that the textual model for the solemnized treatment of Guru Granth Sahib was found in the nineteenth century *Sri Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi*, which described the conducts of Guru Arjan and his closest disciples Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas when the scripture was installed at Harimandir Sahib in 1604. Today the textual reference makes a prototype for the careful ministration of Guru Granth Sahib and liturgies in gurdwaras. Discourses on other historical sources will similarly present the human Gurus as the main designers of Sikh worship: Guru Nanak created the daily routines of reciting *Japji Sahib* in the morning and *Rahiras Sahib* at sunset; Guru Amardas established religious rites at the time of birth, marriage and death due to a growing need to differentiate the Sikh community from other religious traditions; and this development culminated in Guru Gobind Singh's creation of Khalsa which, both in concept and practice, was founded on a formal initiation ceremony. *Divali*, originally a Hindu festival, is said to have been imputed new meanings when Sikh disciples celebrated Guru Hargobind's release from the Fort of Gwalior. From a religious viewpoint, only the human Gurus had agentive power and authority to stipulate and sanction normative acts among their disciples. Religious action at the present should, preferably, stand the historical test of supplying references to the Gurus' teaching in the first hand, and historical Sikh sources about their lives in the second hand.

The ongoing re-telling of history can be interpreted as discursive strategies to make the human Sikh Gurus perpetually present and, at the same time, legitimize and traditionalize current practices. Religious acts are seldom perceived to be modern inventions, but more often presented as adaptations of activities that were created and conducted in a pristine past.<sup>748</sup> Custodians of traditions usually display a deep

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Baba Sundar's work provides one of the more explicit *gurbani* references to a Guru's instruction on the procedures after death, the composition is sometimes recited in its entirety during Sikh post-cremations ceremonies.

<sup>748</sup> Bell 1997: 145.



concern for the formal character of the act and the symbolic materials used, since they consider themselves to be merely recreating ancient customs and returning to scriptural or even divinely authorized practices. Scholars have suggested that traditionalism can be seen as both a means to ritualized action and the effect thereof.<sup>749</sup> Acts which have been exposed to processes of formalization and ritualization appear with an archetypal character.<sup>750</sup> Discourses surrounding the acts will confirm that contemporary worshippers maintain historically ordained acts. Traditionalizing becomes a powerful tool to legitimize religious acts by evoking links to a true and original form of that action.

#### THE GURU GRANTH SAHIB

In traditional historiography the Sikh scripture stands in an intimate relationship to the human Gurus. The sacred text contains the Gurus' compositions and was compiled and venerated by them. At his deathbed in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh declared that the scripture would be the eternal Guru of the Sikhs - the Guru Granth Sahib. As described in Chapter 2, this decree placed the canonized text in a human line of succession and invested it with the same spiritual authority which was traditionally endowed to human preceptors. Local Sikhs will claim that the same "light" or "spirit" (*jot*) which inhabited all the ten human Gurus was made manifest in Guru Granth Sahib. The scripture enshrined the total divine knowledge and power revealed to humanity by its predecessors.

To Sikh devotees this shift of authority implied that devotional stances they had taken up towards the human Gurus in the past would likewise apply to the scripture. By tradition, the manifested form (*sarup*) of the Guru requires respectful treatment as a royal sovereign. The same ethos and modes of practices that presumably existed in the courtly and domestic culture of the human Gurus was, therefore, valid in all contexts in which disciple Sikhs now interacted with the Guru Granth Sahib. As a consequence, the scripture was invested a set of culturally defined habits of the human culture, which in a new historical setting were to be furnished through various devotional practices executed by the Sikhs.

The careful ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib in gurdwaras can be viewed from the perspective of enduring devotional and social relationships between contemporary disciples and the scripture. Well aware that Guru Granth Sahib is a book made of paper and ink, and not alive in any biological sense, the Sikhs treat the text as a personal Guru, which/who possesses social agency. Following anthropological theories, I have argued that local Sikhs personify the scripture and make it socially alive for continued presence and interactions in the human world. This personification is relational and occurs in the context of social relationships. By enmeshing the Guru Granth Sahib in a structure of daily routines and publicly displaying it as a "person" of exalted status, Sikh devotees set the scripture in a network of relation-

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<sup>749</sup> See the examples given by Bell 1997: 149.

<sup>750</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 105.

ships. The Guru Granth Sahib transforms from a mere “book” to a superior subject, who can be the target of real ministration, hear prayers, receive offerings, possess land, and be a causative agent in the human world. Religious acts of and towards the Sikh scripture can be seen as strategies by which worshippers effectively create presence and agency of a majestic Guru, which/who continues to act and interact with disciples. For most believing devotees, the careful ministration of the Guru Granth Sahib and other acts of veneration are perceived to be different forms of *gurseva* – the humble and selfless “service to the Guru” from a sincere devotional heart. To Sikhs, the scripture is perpetually the manifestation of the worldly Guru with authority and capacities to reveal divine knowledge and guidance to humanity. The Guru should hence be served and honored in the very best possible way.

#### THE ETERNAL WORDS

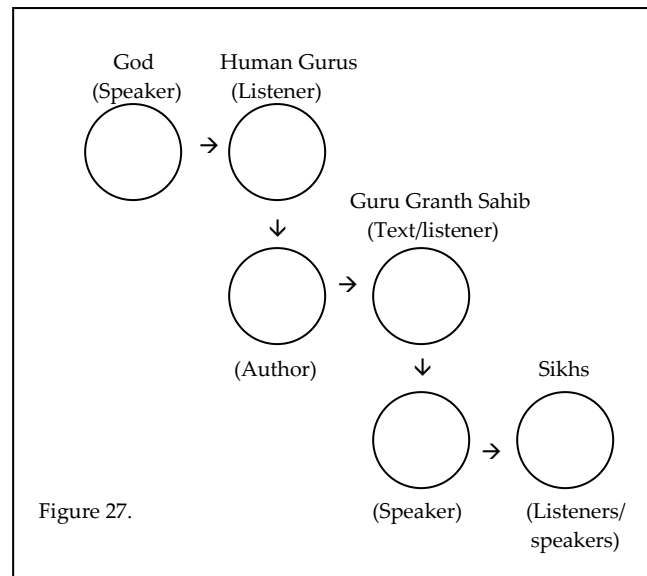
Ultimately it is the words and teaching within Guru Granth Sahib which is the true Guru that illuminates the path of salvation. The daily liturgies performed in the gurdwara consist of a set of formalized acts which strongly emphasize the interior identity of the Guru Granth Sahib. The solemnized opening/revealing and closing/concealing ceremonies of the sacred book are acts of controlling a continued revelation of the true agency of the Guru that forever abides in the scripture. The Sikh model of revelation appears to involve a diachronic scheme, similar to that which Agha (1999) has termed a “speech chain structure”, that is, “a historical series of speech events linked together by the permutation of individuals across speech act roles.”<sup>751</sup> Through activities of speaking, hearing, writing, and the like, different agents are linked together in chains of speech. Unlike ordinary speech events, the Sikh model implies a hierarchical evaluation of the different speech chains involved: the original speech events that took place between God and the human Gurus belonged to a higher order. The Gurus were both listeners of these words and authors of compositions that were later incorporated in the Sikh scripture. After the scripture’s status transformed to Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text became a personified speaker of divine words. Through each step in the chain of speech events, the originally divine words descended to humans in history and are made perpetually manifest in present worship context (See Figure 27).

Most Sikhs will thus argue that *gurbani* words are not created from ordinary human discourses, but reproductions of utterances which stand far above and beyond the influence of contemporary temporal and spatial parameters. Historically, *gurbani* was revealed and “entexualized” by the human Gurus. Sikh disciples of today share the collective responsibility to bring these sacred words out in performance to make the agency of the Word-Guru enduringly manifest in the world. Thus, whenever Sikhs are reciting or singing *gurbani*, they are both speakers and hearers of considerably grander speeches that linked together an aspect of God – the Word – with

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<sup>751</sup> The quotation and idea of a speech chain structure of a higher order is derived from Perrino’s study on Qur’anic healing practices in Senegal. Perrino 2002: 249.

the human Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib and ultimately the pious devotees. Considering this, Sikhs attempt to suppress contextual elements and variations in any rendition of *gurbani* to minimize, what socio-linguistics have termed, the “intertextual gap” between the utterances of the Gurus and the contemporary discursive settings in which the continued transmission emerges.<sup>752</sup> In private and public *gurbani* recitations devotees will silence all other dissenting voices and link their own utterances as directly as possible to the original *gurbani*. There are several strategies by which this can be done when *gurbani* texts move into performance,<sup>753</sup> but two formal devices to mark out that the textual material derives from an otherworldly source is, firstly, to present the sacred words in direct quotations and, secondly, to embed *gurbani* texts with linguistic markers and other types of speech that will separate quotations from the quoting speaker and signal a special frame of interpretation.



<sup>752</sup> Briggs & Bauman 1992: 150.

<sup>753</sup> Du Bois (1986) lists a summary of characteristic performance features and textual features that tend to shift the locus of control and authority over ritual speech from the present speaker to a distant agent and traditional source. Included in the first category is marked voice quality, fluency of speech, stylized and restricted intonational contours, gestalt knowledge, personal volition disclaimers which is crediting a traditional source for the words. Textual features involve, for instance, the use of a ritual register, archaistic elements, euphemism and metaphor, and semantic-grammatical parallelism. See also the review of Keane (1997a) and the analysis of Shoaps (2002).

When Sikhs are rendering *gurbani* they should always remain faithful to the stylistic and content-based features of the sacred texts. The enunciator is not composing but monologically reproducing or quoting the Gurus' speech without adding any subjective characteristics. Quotation helps to establish and maintain a clear separation between the words of the original speakers – the Gurus – from the voices of reciters in a contemporary time and place. In a discourse analysis, Goffman (1981) distinguishes between the various speakers' roles involved in a speech event when a person is speaking on behalf of someone else. Goffman decomposes the concept of a "speaker" in a "production format" which consists of *animator*, *author*, and *principal*. The animator assumes a functional role to produce utterances of words, but he or she is not responsible for the words uttered. The author selects and compiles words in structures and will direct the responsibility of words to someone else. Only the principal assumes responsibility for what is being said and his or her position will be established by the words spoken.<sup>754</sup> Elaborations on the speaker's roles may help understand some of the ways by which religious people invoke sources of otherworldly authority and agency.

To keep the original revelation greater and authoritative, Sikh discourses try to uphold the boundary between the Sikh Gurus (including the Guru Granth Sahib) as the authors of *gurbani*, and devotees as animators, while both categories are historically manifested actors who stand in relation to the divine principal from which the divine words emanated. Recitations and other means of channeling *gurbani* imply a shift of locus of authority from the animator to the author and principal speaker of the sacred words. In performance, the deictic grounding of utterances, which otherwise could link the recited text to the subjective state and volitional agency of the human animator, is intentionally played down to create an autonomous character and hierarchical eminence of the Guru's words.<sup>755</sup> Renditions of *gurbani* shift control from, what Du Bois (1986) has termed, the "proximate speaker", producing utterances, to a spatially and temporally more distant agent or the "prime speaker". This process restricts the human actor's intentionality and responsibility for the words being said.<sup>756</sup>

To establish this reorientation away from the animator – who still remains the human agent enacting quotations in speech – to a prior and higher origin of *gurbani*, recitations often display some marked-out performance features. Prior to any rendering of *gurbani* the reciter usually utters the name of God (*Satnam Vahiguru*) or the *mulmantra*, the initial verse of the scripture, and performs reverential gestures, like bowing. All public performances will conclude with the Khalsa ovation (*Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki Fateh*) and thereafter the Sikh *jaikara* (*Jo bole so nihal, Sat Sri Akal*).<sup>757</sup> When a Sikh performer seated before the Guru Granth Sahib begins to chant

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<sup>754</sup> Goffman 1981: 226.

<sup>755</sup> Keane 1997a: 53.

<sup>756</sup> Du Bois 1986, 1992.

<sup>757</sup> The *Khalsa* ovation and the Sikh salutation frame almost any kind of verbal action in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, even speech of thanks and propaganda.

*Satnam Vahiguru* in a repetitive manner, all assembled in the gurdwara will know that a recitation act of *gurbani* is likely to follow (See Chapter 3). The opening verses and formulas have become conventional in Sikh worship and have propositional meanings which can be explained. But in performance they assume a functional role of providing the interpretative frame and context for what is to come. According to Bateson (1972), linguistic boundary markers like these frame episodes of actions with meta-communicative messages, which evoke a mode of interpretation of that particular action. The messages will announce and instruct listeners that the action or units of action that is to follow is different from ordinary acts.<sup>758</sup> The technique of embedding renditions of *gurbani* with linguistic and non-linguistic markers adds illocutionary forces to the performance. The formulaic invocations and salutations at the beginning and end of performances, as well as the performer's bodily gestures and choice of pitch and intonation, become contextualization cues that signal how devotees should orient themselves towards the speech event by isolating *gurbani* from surrounding discourses, and emphasize that these words are authoritative in themselves. The enunciator may explain the short invocations from a religious framework in terms of a *simran* to settle the mind and become mentally attuned with the divine. He or she remains a social person in a here-and-now context and simultaneously prepares to become a proper medium of the Guru's speech.<sup>759</sup> In recitations the markers are strategic resources to entail a clear shift in the animator's relationship to his or her words, from ordinary talk towards an authoritative speech form that will activate, reveal and make manifest the eternal Guru dwelling within *gurbani*.

Performance features of Sikh worship acts thus forcefully encourage the understanding that *gurbani* stem from a source far beyond current human contexts, but yet are attributed powerful effects and capacities to alter human conditions as the words are made present in the performance. In discourses local Sikhs will confirm that recitations from Guru Granth Sahib, and especially complete and unbroken readings of the whole scripture make the agency of the Guru manifest in temporal and spatial settings. "When arranging *Akhand path*, it is like the house became pure and sacred because Guru Maharaj ji came to the house... *gurbani* was recited at the house," a middle-aged Sikh woman said. She alluded to both the formal installation of Guru Granth Sahib in one single volume and the recitation acts that would bring out the total authoritative speech of the scripture without any break.

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<sup>758</sup> Bateson 1972.

<sup>759</sup> For a discussion on the techniques to transform the enunciator's person into a real supernatural presence, see the analysis of Severi 2002.

#### MULTIPLE CONTEXTS: MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Many Sikhs in Varanasi would say that *Akhand path* is the greatest type of worship, even comparable to the horse sacrifice in Vedic times. Contrary to this, Sikh reformists sometimes point out that *Akhand path* indeed served a practical function in the past when people had restricted access to written editions of the scripture, but the highly formal way to recite the scripture today obscures true comprehension of the Guru's teaching. To reformists the staging of *Akhand path* has become one of the more ritualized events in the Sikh life. As I described in Chapter 3, the performance of *Akhand path* constitutes a larger event which contains several stipulated verbal and nonverbal acts that frame and run parallel to the actual reading from the scripture. Usually, the enactment is handed over to professional reciters who complete the recitation within forty-eight hours. Chapter 4 further illustrated that *Akhand path* makes an integral part of Sikh life-cycle rites and festivals, and is carried out in various life situations to seek divine assistance. Below I will exemplify how *Akhand path* can be attributed multiple meanings depending upon the situational and shifting contexts in which to the performance occurs.

When I first began to analyze my field data, I tried to typologize different stated motives and functions of *Akhand path* (based on performance contexts and themes, such as protection, thanksgiving, commemoration, etc.), which frequently recurred in the accounts of my interlocutors. I soon realized that if I were to follow a typology strictly I would be compelled to exclude many reasons (and the absence of reasons) and create a classification of motive types that would either reflect a false objectivity or develop into infinite dimensions. The performance of *Akhand path* seems to have a quality of being open for a variety of verbally articulated motives of both a secular and a religious nature. Local Sikhs may say they arrange the recitation for success in a business venture or an examination; for divine support and protection in times of illness; to thank God for fortunate events that have occurred or just because the heart and mind "feel for it". The list of stated motives is long (See Figure 28).

Other interlocutors may also reveal that they do not need any specific reason for staging an *Akhand path*; it is simply a custom that should be performed at regular intervals, or they do it because they have the required financial resources and other community members also do it. Clients who are sponsoring an *Akhand path* may choose to keep their name and private motives secret from the community. During my stay at Varanasi this happened in a few cases, when not even the *pathis* knew for which cause they were performing the recitation. To keep the motives confidential is not treated with suspicion but explicated from a theological framework: God is the "knower of inner things" (*antar jami*) and can see people's inner thoughts. It is therefore not necessary to utter one's motives for the performance. According to the *granthis* in Varanasi, they have never refused a sponsoring client on account of dubious reasons. One of them stated: "It is our duty to do *Akhand path*. I won't even refuse my enemy. If I did that it would bring disgrace to this place. People come here with hope and we have to help them."

Examples of  
STATED REASONS FOR PERFORMING *AKHAND PATH*

- It forms a part of Sikh ceremonies (weddings, death ceremonies, etc.)
- To celebrate the Sikh Gurus on festival days (The birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh)
- To mitigate diseases and sufferings
- To celebrate birthdays of family members
- Installation of a new shop or a new house
- To pass an examination with good grades
- To gain domestic peace and peace of one's mind/heart
- To prevent sadness and misfortunes from entering the house
- To purify the house and overcome death pollution
- To transform times of sadness to times of happiness
- To make a travelling family member return home
- To gain divine protection before a journey
- To seek good health for elder family members
- To protect deceased family members after death
- To commemorate ancestors on birthdays or death days
- To thank and praise God
- To bless the purchase of a new car, scooter, and other material things
- One has promised the Guru/God to do so
- Because a personal wish or request has come true
- Because *Akhand path* has not been arranged for a long time
- Because other community members do it
- Because it is a family tradition
- Because the family has sufficient financial means
- Because the heart and mind desires it
- Because someone received something good unexpectedly
- Because it is the best worship
- There is no reason or needs to be any reason because God is "the knower of inner things"

Figure 28.

From this also follows the difficulty in detecting a single or all-comprehensive meaning of *Akhand path* by analyzing verbally expressed motives and purposes of individual Sikhs. Only on a general level can one observe that religious people believe that *Akhand path* manifests the Guru in temporal and spatial settings, since the performance implicates the physical presence of a printed edition of Guru Granth Sahib and the uninterrupted reading of the text from the first to the last page. Moreover, the stated motives do not affect nor provide any detailed information about the actual enactment of *Akhand path*. Regardless of the situational contexts or underlying motives of the sponsor, the recitation is always executed in a similar manner, without omitting any of the discrete opening, parallel, and concluding acts which constitute the recognizable structure of the performance (See Figure 16, Chapter 3). This "gap"

between the highly stipulated formal features of *Akhand path* and the apparent lack of one coherent “meaning” seems to make the performance “apprehensible” for the assimilation of multitude meanings derived from contextual elements.<sup>760</sup> As the entextualized text of Guru Granth Sahib contextualizes in the performance of *Akhand path* within a particular social framework, the recitation can evoke several meta-leveled symbolic meanings, illocutionary functions, and perlocutionary effects. Celebrants will draw these meanings from surrounding discourses or from the positioning of *Akhand path* within the structure of other Sikh ceremonies. In some instances the tradition will specify conventional meanings and effects which can be expected from the enactment.

Take, for example, the performance of *Akhand path* during a death ceremony. In Varanasi the Sikh observances following a death usually span over a period of thirteen days and comprise of a set of acts that should be performed prior and subsequent to the cremation. The death ceremony is not one single ritual but provides a new context that brings together and reframes a plurality of common worship forms – such as recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib*, *Kirtan* performances, readings of *Ardas*, and so on – that appear in other ceremonies as well. In this particular context *Akhand path* makes a post-cremation ritual, arranged from the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> day after a death. The auspicious completion of the recitation finalizes the death ceremony when community members express condolences with the chief mourners by dressing up in white clothes and together perform a last prayer for the deceased. When asked the reasons for performing the recitation on this occasion, some of my informants would say “it is for the peace of the deceased soul”, “for respect to the deceased family member”, “to support the mourners in their grief”, “because it was the last wish of the deceased” or “because it is a part of the death ceremony”. These responses have a common denominator in that they refer to social and emotional circumstances surrounding real human experiences of death. Others would develop more elaborate religious explanations to present *Akhand path* as a worship act that would generate good karma and assist the soul of the deceased on the journey to a divine court. In either case there was no intrinsic single meaning to the performance, but respondents drew their own reasons from religious discourses and social conditions which they themselves found most significant in the particular situation and superimposed on the performance.

The range of these “derived” or “proposed” meanings, however, is not entirely ad lib since people are socialized and situated within a given cultural framework. To arrange an *Akhand path* after a death is a practice stipulated by the tradition and the expressed meanings for observing this practice quite often employ and refer back to fairly conventional beliefs, purposes, and norms. For instance, local Sikhs recurrently say that *Akhand path* and the final reading of *Ardas* in the gurdwara are conducted “for the peace of the deceased soul”. When the mourners are sending out invitation letters to the congregation before the gathering, they will similarly write that they

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<sup>760</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 227.



shall arrange *Akhand path* “for the peace of the soul” (*atma ki shanti ke lie*). The expression “for the peace of the soul” has assumed almost a formulaic character in explanations about the reasons for staging *Akhand path* in a death ceremony, even if individual Sikhs may elaborate and interpret the soteriological depths of this sentence in many different ways.

A somewhat useful term to explain the workings of meaning construction is what scholars in linguistics and literature studies call interdiscursivity or intertextuality,<sup>761</sup> that is, utterances and texts always relate to other discourses in a web of relationships. To the literary theorist Bakhtin, human utterances circulating through society always respond to previous utterances and are constructed from larger and already existing discourses.<sup>762</sup> Utterances display a dialogic relationship in the sense that “the now-said reaches back to and somehow incorporates or resonates with the already-said and reaches ahead to, anticipates, and somehow incorporates the to-be-said.”<sup>763</sup> Bakhtin considered this dialogic principle of human communication foundational for the constitution and historical continuity of societies. Elaborating these ideas, Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” which referred to the dialogic relationships between texts. By shifting focus from utterances to texts, Kristeva saw that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” and thus embodies intertextual relations.<sup>764</sup> Just as an author brings together the textual masonry from the larger ongoing discourses in society and the “meaning” of a text is to be found in these intertextual relations, so are Sikhs articulating meanings from discourses that transcend the limits of the performed event. Many religious acts may present an original or ideal meaning encoded by the authoritative tradition, but practicing devotees will still decode and understand these meanings from their distinct matrices of interdiscursivity. Using Bhaktin’s terminology, one could argue that processes of meaning construction present ongoing tensions and interplay between official ideologies and centripetal (monologic) discourses and centrifugal (dialogic) forces which will promote the unofficial and more subjective dimensions.<sup>765</sup>

To stage an *Akhand path* within the framework of a death ceremony “for the peace of the soul” might be linked with a number of outside religious discourses on the soul’s destiny after death. People will say they have read in books or heard from their grandparents, saintly people, and other significant persons that the performance will assist the deceased soul on its otherworldly travel, grant a place in the divine court, or protect the soul from a ghostly existence. From a rich repertoire of publicly-known alternatives they emphasize the ideational aspects of Sikh doctrines or popu-

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<sup>761</sup> Bauman suggests one should reserve the term interdiscursive for matters concerning utterances in the Bakhtian sense and intertextuality for relationships between texts (Bauman 2005: 146).

<sup>762</sup> Allen 2000: 19.

<sup>763</sup> Bauman 2005: 145.

<sup>764</sup> Kristeva 1980: 66.

<sup>765</sup> Allen 2000: 22.

lar beliefs they consider kernel, and represent these ideas to themselves and others. In a similar fashion, locals may cast around several meanings of other religious worship acts from different contextual and interdiscursive variables. The motives and expected effects of reciting *Sukhmani Sahib*, for example, can be “to cleanse the soul”, “pacify emotions”, “obtain happiness”, or even “cast out evil spirits”. When *Sukhmani Sahib* is performed before a wedding ceremony it is said to bring good luck to the bridal couple, while the same type of reading before a death aims to mitigate suffering and provide a good death of the dying. On a general level local Sikhs will present interpretations on the positive effects of reciting the text, derived from dominant discourses about the history and power of *Sukhmani Sahib*, while more circumstantial meanings and purposes of the performances remain receptive to contextual matters in changing situations.

Another and more intricate feature of meaning construction concerns illocutionary forces evoked by the relations and interplay between different religious acts performed within the same structure of a ceremony. Bauman & Briggs argue that “the illocutionary force of an utterance often emerges not simply from its placement within a particular genre and social setting but also from the indexical relations between the performance and other speech events that precede and succeed it.”<sup>766</sup> Ritual theorists have paid attention to the emergence of meta-communicative meanings in repeated re-arrangements of ritual elements within recognizable sequential orders. Expanding the notion of intertextuality, the term “interrituality” has been used to foreground the resonant character of ritual acts. As Olsson suggests, the notion of interrituality signifies the relationship between formal acts incorporated into ritual constellations and other acts and conducts that may occur in different contexts.<sup>767</sup> Ritual systems seem to comprise a “repertory of prescribed acts” that is placed at the agent’s disposal and obtain a “quoting” character when being performed.<sup>768</sup> This theoretical observation points to an important aspect of the creation of ritual performances: people often bring together well-known and recognizable stipulated acts – linguistic and paralinguistic – into new ritual structures. The acts can bear relation to ritual elements in other ceremonies and much broader networks of everyday cultural attitudes and behaviors.

The Sikh death ceremony, for instance, will consist of a cluster of already existing acts and sequences of acts (including *Akhand path*) that are incorporated and set in relation to other acts within the structure of the ceremony. This juxtaposition of different acts within a ritual structure may also generate new meanings. Many of my interlocutors would attribute the performance of *Akhand path* transformative functions, to overcome grief and death pollution and restore social order at the house. Six months after a death the mourners would stage an additional *Akhand path* in the

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<sup>766</sup> Bauman & Briggs 1990: 64. Haring has coined the term “interperformance” for the “relation of inclusion which connects story-telling events to the various types of discourse which engender them” (Haring 1988: 365).

<sup>767</sup> Olsson 2000b: 289.

<sup>768</sup> Olsson 2000a: 54.

name of the deceased. Some said they carefully avoided celebrating auspicious events, like engagements, weddings, and did not even buy new clothes for marriage parties before this performance had been completed. In this context, they ascribed the recitation illocutionary forces to transform the properties of time and space as well as human social and mental conditions. The believed perlocutionary effect of recitation in this context was that people could return to an ordinary state of affairs. This transformative function, which people superimposed on *Akhand path*, was derived from its relation to preceding conventional acts in the death ceremony – preparations of the corpse, cremation, prayers, and *gurbani* recitations – all of which directly or indirectly define the state of disorder accompanying a death. When *Akhand path* is staged in ceremonies surrounding other social events with other interritual constellations, the illocutionary forces will also change. In different situations of experienced need, *Akhand path* may be presented either as an act of thanksgiving addressed to God or an offering in hope to win divine favours in return, depending upon the relation to other preceding and following acts. The performance is not symbolizing human thankfulness or sacrifices but accomplishes the same by the enactment. Below I will further illustrate how the dialogic relationship between different religious acts becomes noticeable in ceremonies which people assign the capacity to establish human-divine communication.

To summarize the above discussion one could say that there is not a single symbolic meaning to religious acts but people may ascribe their action a variety of motives, purposes, functions and effects. These meanings are evoked by outside discourses when religious action contextualizes in a particular situational setting. An analysis of the sequences of action in larger ceremonies can also suggest that meanings are sometimes evoked by relationships between acts performed within one and the same ritual structure, that is, from the interritual dynamics of performance.

### MEANINGS WITHIN TEXTS

The above sections have exemplified how multiple meanings attributed religious action can emerge from contextual and formal elements of performances. To study only formal features of performance cannot, however, tell us what the Sikhs believe their words and acts accomplish.<sup>769</sup> From a religious point of view, *gurbani* stores all the necessary meanings one might seek for all religious and social activities in human life, simply because it is the teaching and guidance of the eternal Guru. Moreover, *gurbani* has causal power to exert influences on humans and their social world in a number of ways. This efficacy rests on explicit beliefs in the nature of the sacred

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<sup>769</sup> Bloch (1989) has argued that speeches exposed to formalization will lose their propositional forces. Great constraints on the linguistic form will suppress the referential content and creativity but enhance illocutionary forces. The Sikh case appears to pose a challenge to this theory, since propositional meanings of *gurbani* remains significant even in highly formalized speech acts. Bloch's theory could possibly be useful for an analysis of *Akhand path* performances.

speech: because of the ontologically divine nature, the words are effective in themselves and always adaptable to changing human conditions. The Gurus' words are so powerful that "even in the deepest jungle their utterances will protect humans from the wildest animals and the most evil spirits," as a Sikh man said. A correct and devotional engagement in *gurbani* can bring about an endless variety of effects.

Local Sikhs will derive the meanings to many of their worship acts from discourses on the semantic inner of Guru Granth Sahib and hymns accredited *gurbani* status. The sacred texts are considered to unfold a seamless world of meanings that set models for religious acts and instruct people on the purposes for which these acts are to be undertaken. Whenever the sacred hymns contextualize in performance, they bring with them a store of meanings which can be appropriated by devotees. Interpretations of themes, metaphors, parables, and other semantic components of the hymns are believed to directly relate to expected effects of reciting these sacred verses (and thereby determine the prior purposes and motives people should have for doing this). Propositional meanings extracted from *gurbani* words are treated as meta-pragmatic directives of the Guru who/which describes the results that can be accomplished by religious action. In religious worship, the utterance of these words become performative acts which are believed to affect circumstances beyond their textual confines, not merely by shaping discourses, but to influence people and create something in the world. The efficacy thus lies within *gurbani* words and to access the powerful forces therein humans must activate the words in worship.

The primary device to interlink semantic elements of *gurbani* texts with expected effects of performing the texts seems to go through a sort of parallelism, between images in the Gurus' language and contemporary human experiences and situations in wider social fields. When an infertile woman, for example, is advised by the *granthi* or some other knowledgeable person to daily recite a particular *gurbani* hymn to be blessed with a son, she might read Guru Arjan's words of how a son is conceived and delivered from blessings granted by a divine agent.<sup>770</sup> Recitations of these verses establish a semantic link between the Guru's figurative description and the desired effects which incite the woman to recite the hymn in the first place. Other hymns prescribed for fertility will enclose images of a foetus transformed into a baby in the mother's womb or describe the joyful event of being blessed with a child. From a textual viewpoint, the metaphors in *gurbani* often symbolize intimate human-divine relationships and divine blessings granted from true devotion. The linguistic images emerge as expressive symbols that should move the reader to new semantic contexts and to key principles of the Gurus' teaching. When these images move into performance to be recited, they seem to generate indexical relationships to the perlocutionary effect anticipated from a recitation, in the sense that the social effect of reciting the text is part of the signifier within the text.<sup>771</sup> There is no direct link between the metaphor of childbirth and a real physical pregnancy, but we can still draw an analogy

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<sup>770</sup> GGS: 396. See quotation in Chapter 4 part 1.

<sup>771</sup> See Rappaport's discussion on indexical relationships in rituals (Rappaport 1999: 57).

between the two references. The *gurbani* text will be treated as if it indicates the divine favours which the woman can expect to gain from her recitation; its semantic properties create indexical ties to possible human conditions and states of affairs in the social reality. Simultaneously, the woman's reading of the verses becomes a performative act that is believed to accomplish the very same thing. Her prior intention and the expected function of the linguistic act is a real pregnancy. She is not attributing her recitation a symbolic function, just as she does not want to become symbolically pregnant, but believes the performance may cause an affect on her body.

As religious people would explicate this intricate relationship between text and effects of religious action, engagement in *gurbani* texts are devotional acts and worship of God through the mediating agency of *gurbani*, at the same time as *gurbani* tells us about the divine favours which might be imparted from this worship. *Gurbani* verses give instructions on situations and conditions for which they are appropriate, that is, the metaphors and images indicate, in subtler or palpable wordings, different application fields for using the words. The selection and uses of many other *gurbani* verses used for particular causes seem to return to similar indexical connections between the text and the expected result. A hymn, in which Guru Nanak clothes the longing for union with God in the dress of a woman's yearning for her lover, can be recited if one wishes to join a boy and a girl in marriage or create more affection between a husband and wife. Even imprisoned criminals can increase their chances of being released by reciting a verse which describes how mythological robbers and prostitutes were granted spiritual liberation.<sup>772</sup> Rather than being treated as merely accounts from the past or symbolic speech, the *gurbani* words are directives for the action they themselves can bring about in the moment of reciting them. The renditions of sacred texts become instrumental performative acts which are believed to carry out perlocutionary effects on the human life.

Performances of some specific *gurbani* hymns have also become associated with certain powers depending upon the form, content, and author of the compositions. As Chapter 3 illustrated, Guru Arjan's *Sukhmani Sahib* is regarded as an endless source of peace and happiness, while *Chaupai Sahib*, ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh, provides protection and makes people fearless. As the first hymn of the Sikh scripture, Guru Nanak's *Japji Sahib* is thought of as opening to the Guru's teaching on the path towards salvation, the recitation of which will grant spiritual merits and mark the beginning of a day, the human life and every new enterprise conducted therein. A reading of the hymn *Kirtan Sohila*, on the other hand, is associated with a closure of the day and will mark the end of a human life. The general meanings ascribed to these *gurbani* hymns have become more or less conventional in the local Sikh world. In other instances the connection with purpose, text, and effect is less direct, as in the case of recitations of the formulaic *mulmantra*, or "root mantra" which opens the Guru Granth Sahib and acknowledges the various attributes of God. Following the structure of the Sikh scripture, the *mulmantra* is usually the first verse (of 108 verses) to

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<sup>772</sup> GGS: 830.

appear in the different editions of the anthology *Sankat Mochan*, along with instructions to repeat the mantra 108 times to ensure the realization of a wide range of aspirations, such as “grant salvation” or “all wishes will be fulfilled”.<sup>773</sup> The efficacious power of the *mulmantra* and the conventional effects of reciting it seem to derive from the fact that the verse opens the Guru Granth Sahib and is Guru Nanak’s original invocation of the ultimate divine power.

Reading about the Gurus’ descriptions of ritual acts is, by some Sikhs, believed to substitute more complex ritual operations. For instance, a regular reading of Guru Arjan’s account of the benefits of taking a dip in the sacred pool (*sarovar*) surrounding Harimandir Sahib at Amritsar is, by some, believed to generate the same merits as a real bath.<sup>774</sup> According to this thinking, the Sikh Gurus undercut the entire rationale of ritualism, and particularly the one found in the Hindu tradition, by preaching devotion from a true heart. For contemporary disciples, *gurbani* can replace all ritual activities. Recitations of verses in which the Gurus explicitly state that true devotion and remembrance of the God will grant the same merits as pilgrimage, sacrifices, and the like, are considered equivalent to the complex ritual endeavors referred to in the text and will produce the same effects. The reading of texts substitutes the doing of rituals, and makes the words become acts.

These examples seem to suggest that form, content, and authorship of the entextualized *gurbani* texts are considered significant sources of meanings to verbal and non-verbal practices. Every condition and challenge in the human world is mirrored in the sacred texts, nothing excluded. The Gurus’ words and deeds provide a rich treasure, from which local Sikhs can derive both legitimization and signification to their practices.

## DEVICES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Studies on religious language recurrently pay attention to the existing tension between spontaneously created speech which reflects the worshippers’ personal motives and the invocation of a fixed prior canon.<sup>775</sup> In Sikh worship, both textual and performance features of *gurbani* renditions and many stipulated acts suppress information about devotee’s intentions and motives in specific situations to support the perception of words and acts as already scripted beyond present contexts. At the same time, the Sikh tradition strongly encourages devotees to engage in personal and heartily felt devotion to the divine power and follow the superior teaching of the

<sup>773</sup> See e.g. *Sankat Mochan* compiled by Giani Narain Singh and Giani Gurcharan Singh.

<sup>774</sup> GGS: 623.

<sup>775</sup> The tension between the sincerity of prayers and the formal renditions of fixed texts has been observed in studies on Protestant communities which emphasize the personal and heartily felt religious experiences. See e.g., Bauman’s (1990) studies of English Quakers, Keane’s (1997b) study of Sumbanese Protestants and Shoaps’ (2002) analysis of Pentecostal prayers and songs. Free-formed speech and fixed speech can be viewed as different typologies of texts, similar to Atkinson’s distinction between performance-oriented and liturgy-oriented rituals (Atkinson 1989).

Guru, which is always adaptable to changing human conditions. How, then, do people make formalized verbal and non-verbal action meaningful to their own state of affairs? By which means do Sikhs personalize standardized worship acts to communicate their own motives to an invisible divine interlocutor? Considering that Sikhs clearly mark out that *gurbani* is of an otherworldly source, what do they do to make these words meet the ever-changing present? In other words, how do entextualized words and acts contextualize?

Rappaport (1999) appears to touch upon a similar opposition between the everlasting and the ever-changing aspects of religious traditions when he distinguishes between “canonical” and “self-referential” meta-messages that can be evoked and communicated in ritual action. According to Rappaport, “[t]he self-referential represents the immediate, the particular and the vital aspects of *events*; the canonical, in contrast, represents the general, enduring, or even eternal aspects of *universal orders*.”<sup>776</sup> Self-referential messages concern the current physical and social states of individual participants, while the canonical messages are perceived to be already encoded and do not in themselves represent or express current states of participants. As Rappaport exemplifies:

That the *Shema*, the Ultimate Sacred Postulate of the Jews, may not have changed in 3000 years is one thing, that a particular person recites it on a particular occasion is another. The *Shema* remains unchanged, but those who utter it, and thus place themselves in a certain relationship to it, continue to change as circumstances change and as generation succeeds generation.<sup>777</sup>

The two categories of messages are dependant upon each other: self-referential messages achieve acceptability by being associated with the canonical, while canonical messages need to be accompanied with self-referential messages to make sense and obtain its force.<sup>778</sup> Even the most formalized act and ritual order will thus provide spaces for variations in order to make eternal messages durably relevant to present conditions.

In Sikh worship, the religious speech event which seems to be the primary means to make the eternal *gurbani* relevant to changing contexts and, at the same time, facilitate interactions with the divine, is the performance of the Sikh prayer *Ardas*. As was described in Chapter 3, the *Ardas* text has itself been exposed to a process of entextualization. Irrespective of time and location, Sikhs all over the world will replicate the same text, word by word. While the beginning of the text, eulogizing the Sikh Gurus, is attributed *gurbani* status, the latter part is presented as quoted speech by the collective of Sikhs. The performance of *Ardas* has assumed certain formal fea-

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<sup>776</sup> Rappaport 1999: 53.

<sup>777</sup> Rappaport 1999: 53.

<sup>778</sup> Rappaport 1999: 58.

tures that encourage people to interpret the speech event as a petition made to an invisible interlocutor. Before starting a reading of the text, Sikhs sing stanza 4:8 of *Sukhmani Sahib*, which by some is considered to be the “real” and original prayer of Guru Arjan and in the performance functions like a call to prayer. The single stanza metonymically labels the reading of *Ardas* and, thereby, sets the frame for an event during which disciple humbly entreats a supreme power for aid and forgiveness. What remains unique for the reading of *Ardas* is the opening at the end of the text, in which Sikhs may insert personalized verbal statements. The insertion may include explicit presentations of individual or collective motives for which the *Ardas* and other devotional undertakings are conducted. The verbal interjection will, in fact, present most religious acts in the guise of humble offerings which devotees make to God. When people perform worship acts for special causes, the reading will include detailed requests or commissives addressed to a divine hearer.<sup>779</sup> Without an *Ardas*, the invisible God is not informed on the worship people have conducted and this may influence the desired effects and results of that action. The interjection will therefore impart the name and identity of the human subject(s) presenting the *Ardas* and include several deictic grounding devices (like “we”, “here”, “today”), which make it possible to index personal and socially shared experiences.<sup>780</sup> These deictic expressions become verbal specifications of contextual elements that are constantly shifting as performances are grounded in new and changing social events. They also emphasize that the human “animators” are the authors responsible for the words communicated in this section of *Ardas* (unlike the standardized main text).

The ethnography on Sikh worship acts at Varanasi has illustrated how every *gurbani* rendition and religious ceremony will be framed by the performance of *Ardas*. In Sikh life everything begins and ends with a reading of *Ardas*. This phenomenon, one could argue, reflects a significant meta-pragmatic strategy to recontextualize formalized religious action. The distance between subjective stances in ever-changing contexts and a stable canon and stipulated acts is successfully bridged by incorporating “self-referential” messages to the reading of *Ardas*, and then allow this reading to frame other Sikh worship acts within larger ceremonial constellations. From the location of *Ardas* within the sequential order of Sikh ceremonies – in the opening and at the end – the performance becomes a meta-commentary, which can provide the frame for understanding situational meanings and the particular temporal and spatial aspects of other religious acts. The reading of *Ardas* within larger ceremonies supplies “contextualization cues” that channel interpretative frames to understand people’s situational motives and meanings for performing other ritual acts. The *Ardas* accomplishes this by clarifying the social circumstances, the subjective states of devotees, and the desired (and conventional) effects, which explain how the religious acts should be understood. The reading of *Ardas* becomes a device to connect contextual

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<sup>779</sup> In case a reading of *Ardas* is the only act to be performed, the verbal inclusion will reflexively refer back to the *Ardas* reading itself.

<sup>780</sup> Hanks 1989, Shoap 2002.



variations with the eternal “canonical messages” in the Sikh religious life and tradition.

Yet Sikhs maintain that *Ardas* is a petition or a request addressed to a divine interlocutor. It is a means to communicate one’s personal and collective wishes to the formless God. Furthermore, the ways by which the performance of *Ardas* is interconnected with the taking and reciting of *Hukam* in Sikh ceremonies emphasize that this communication is not always considered monologic (Sikhs sending messages to a divine recipient), but dialogic and interactive in character. For instance, when *Ardas* is read to gain divine protection for a family member suffering from a disease the verbal report in the opening of the text will mention the physical condition of the sufferer and ask for divine assistance. Immediately after, the *granthi* or some other attendant will take a *Hukam* from the Guru Granth Sahib which will be perceived to transmit divine blessings and guidance to the conditions that were mentioned in the preceding supplication. The relationship between the enactment of *Ardas* and *Hukam* makes people interpret the former as a human request and the latter as a divine answer through the mediating agency of the Guru Granth Sahib. It becomes a dialogic and interactive event during which the invisible divine is directly communicating to humans through the verses of the sacred scripture. Thus, the performance of *Ardas* has the capacity to personalize, contextualize, and clarify the expected effects of formalized acts and ceremonies by transporting self-referential messages into performance and being positioned as a frame to other acts. From its interritual relation to the enactment of a *Hukam*, it assumes the identity of a performative act that brings about interaction between humans and the invisible divine being.

#### “MEANING TO MEAN IT”

Over and again my Sikh interlocutors at Varanasi stressed the importance of having true and pure intentions when conducting worship acts. A recitation of *gurbani* can be conducted for almost any prior reason, but what distinguishes a favourable recitation, believed to generate powerful effects, from a recitation performed out of formality is the sincere intent which the worshipper feels in his or her heart in the moment of reciting. The devotee performing religious worship acts should “mean” and “feel” what he or she is doing. The individual and emotionally felt sincerity in any worship act is a devotional device which determines the benefits one might gain from it.

When unfolding their theory of ritual, Humphrey & Laidlaw dedicate a whole chapter to, what they call, “meaning to mean it” – the act of intending to carry out ritual acts. Paradoxically, they strongly argue that ritualized acts are non-intentional and cannot be identified by the actor’s intentions. The different types of “intentions” contemplated in their theoretical model involve, firstly, the reasons and motives people may have for conducting acts and which they attribute action and, secondly, the intention “in the doing of action” which ceases to identify acts which have assumed a ritualized and stipulated character. By the notion of “meaning to mean it”, Humphrey & Laidlaw introduce yet another and third type of intentions that needs clarifi-

cation. “Meaning to mean it” is, in Humphrey & Laidlaw’s wordings, “experiencing modes of enactment and prepositional meanings as sincerely and emotionally felt”,<sup>781</sup> in other words, a mental mode of a ritual actor in the moment of performing acts. The intention signified is not a propositional religious statement of the devotee, but a strong feeling of genuinely “meaning to mean it”. As Humphrey & Laidlaw clarifies, “no one except for the actor knows if he or she feels that what is being thought is really meant in this sense. But for the actor the distinction is very important.”<sup>782</sup> When their Jain interlocutors explained the achievement of conducting a *puja* they recurred to the cultural idiom of *bhav*, which was explained in terms of a religious sentiment, a deep sincerity in worship, or a mental medium cognate to the notion of devotion (*bhakti*). As Humphrey & Laidlaw interpret Jain worship, the notion of *bhav* stands at the core of *puja* performances and signifies “the medium within which religious meanings come to be realized and attributed to ritual archetypes.”<sup>783</sup> Like other “meanings” people may attribute to ritual action, *bhav* and the feeling of sincerity is something that actors superimpose on their action.

To the Jain laity, the experience of *bhav* is considered both a means and end to *puja* performances. Like many other religious traditions in India, Jainism advocates that all human action produces karma that binds the human soul to the cycle of re-births. The soul can be freed from transmigration by meditation and ascetic practices that intentionally work against the accumulation of karma. Humphrey & Laidlaw note that the observance of *puja* worship may appear paradoxical to the notion of enlightenment through “non-action” in the Jain philosophy, but to lay-Jains the *puja* performance remains an important expression of devotion. The presence of *bhav* in *puja* enactments enables people to gain spiritual insight from devotional acts, and even transform ritual action to a type of “non-action”. To have the correct *bhav* is the way by which lay-Jains transform ritual action to religious “non-action”.

My Sikh friends at Varanasi would employ the words *bhav* or *bhavna* to indicate an individually-felt sincerity in the performance of religious action.<sup>784</sup> In the Punjabi language the noun *bhav* is enriched with several connotations, such as “underlying meaning or idea, import, sense, drift of thought; gist, purport, purpose, object; feeling, sentiment, emotion, passion, sensibility, affection.”<sup>785</sup> The noun *bhavna* equally displays many semantic shades, like “desire, wish, fancy, feeling; sentiments, inclination, thinking, way of thinking, motive,” and is used in a wide range of religious and secular contexts.<sup>786</sup> Considerably many would equate the word *bhavna* with “will” or “wish” (*iccha*), which people have and do verbally articulate as the prime reason for

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<sup>781</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 213.

<sup>782</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 210.

<sup>783</sup> Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 162.

<sup>784</sup> Another noun occasionally used for the ideal feeling when performing worship acts is *dharna*, which in translation means “fasting to obtain favours” or “sitting constantly at the door of a person whose attention one is demanding” (McGreggor 1997: 524).

<sup>785</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 642.

<sup>786</sup> Gill & Joshi 1999: 643.

engaging in religious action. The word also signified an internal feeling of sincerity and reverence (*shraddha*) that people experienced in the moment of performing worship. Thus, *bhavna* designated both a devotional quality of one's prior intention and a feeling of actually "meaning to mean" something in the actual enactment of action. In this dual sense, local Sikhs would distinguish between pure [*shuddh*] and impure [*ashuddh*] *bhavna*. An elderly Sikh man explicated the difference in the following way:

*Bhavna* means wishes, desires and reverence. Your *bhavna* depends upon your feelings. A person has desire either to give or to take. Some people attend the gurdwara to see and be seen by other people. Others go to the gurdwara only with a wish to thank God from their heart. Only those people with pure [*shuddh*] *bhavna* will have their wishes come true. If you are not clean from the inside you will get nothing. You can do worship for the whole day, even deep meditation, but you will get nothing. If you pour fresh milk into a dirty pot the milk will be destroyed. You will always get the fruits of your actions according to your *bhavna*. God knows what you want. If your feelings from the inside are good, he will listen. God is not deaf. He knows what you want.

Similar to the Jain case, *bhavna* becomes a relevant category of an intricate relationship between the individual worshipper, his or her religious acts, and the effects of that action. The individual is seen as the locus of meanings, emotions, and desires that will generate qualitatively different effects of religious action. Having "pure" *bhavna* can be crucial when the acts to be conducted are highly stipulated and the words to be spoken are formulaic and not subject to manipulation by the worshipper.

The quality of the worshipper's *bhavna* does not merely work as regulator or medium to transform action into devotional deeds, but it is also believed to affect the expected results of the acts performed.<sup>787</sup> Consider again the woman who recites a *gurbani* hymn to be blessed with a child. To make her ritual enactment beneficial and result in a pregnancy her *bhavna* is considered imperative. Whether she sincerely wishes for a child and recites the hymn with full devotion, or hypothetically is compelled by relatives or family traditions to do the same, it is believed to yield two quite divergent results. Her "pure" *bhavna* endows the religious action with a devotional quality that she believes will improve her chances to be blessed with a pregnancy. Moreover, *bhavna* may work as a mental means by which the woman considers herself to be emotionally and cognitively communicating with God. Whether she articulates her wishes for a child in a formal prayer or believes the divine "knower of all

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<sup>787</sup> An exception is those social functions and effects of performative acts which are dependant upon conventions. For example, a wedding couple do not become less or more married in case they complete the Sikh *Anand Karaj* ceremony, but lack pure intentions, sincerity, or devotion. The couple will still be considered married if they have fulfilled the enactment. Conventions rather than sincerity conditions will determine the effects of these acts.

inner things" can read her heart, the formal act of reciting *gurbani* becomes her way to offer worship to a divine recipient. In this case *bhavana* makes the qualitative difference between religious action and mere mechanical repetition of words and acts. But it still remains that *bhavana* is a type of "meaning" which people superimpose on religious action, and its presence does not necessarily influence the formal features of performances in shifting contexts.

A more sympathetic approach to Sikh reformists and other critics of "empty" ritualism could possibly discover that far from all discourses target people's actual engagement in what appears to be ritual action, but more particularly the performance of action devoid of *bhavana*. It is considered imperative to the Sikh teaching that spiritual gains of any devotional activity are dependent upon the actor's emotional and cognitive state in the doing of action. Unlike the Jain soteriological paradigm, local Sikhs do not visualize the ultimate goal of religious endeavours as a resignation of actions or a complete release from karmic bonds. As the concluding section will discuss further, my Sikh friends would rather explain their ideas about spiritual liberation in terms of a condition in which the human mind/heart is detached from worldly matters, but fully engaged in worship. The performance of religious acts continues even in a liberated state, but with the qualitative difference that it is completely governed by devotion and commitment to God. From a Sikh understanding, *bhavana* is thus not the means by which people are transforming ritual action to non-action, as in the Jain case, but a way of making religious acts saturated by devotion. Considering that the word *bhavana* is often used as analogous to devotion, "true" worship is ultimately when actions are emptied of profane desires and cravings and the execution of selfless acts becomes the aim and goal in itself. This state of devotion and sincerity, however, can only be internally felt and acknowledged by the individual worshipper.

### 5.3. THE AIMS OF BHAKTI

Introductory books on the Sikh religion will often contain brief soteriological statements about *mukti* – liberation, release, and emancipation – as the ultimate goal of engaging oneself in the Guru's teaching and religious practices.<sup>788</sup> Scholarly interpretations of the word *mukti* will further illustrate that the Sikh teaching shares with other Indian religions the basic underlying concept of the human bondage to the cycle of birth and rebirth on account of the effects of karma.<sup>789</sup> To attain liberation is to exhaust all effects of karma in order to be released from the bonded state, which implies extinction of ignorance, desires, attachments to the world, and ultimately the rolling wheel of births and deaths. The concept of *mukti* signifies the realization of the infinite dimensions of the spiritual self and one's belonging to a divine power. This

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<sup>788</sup> *Mukti* is synonymous to the Sanskrit word *moksh*.

<sup>789</sup> See e.g. Nripinder Singh 1990, Dharam Singh 1991, Joshi 1999.

realization is presented in terms of enlightenment or mystical experience when the formless divine speaks the unspoken Word (*anhad shabad*) – the Word which resounds without being spoken – within the human interior that is cleansed of egoism. The experience of the Word lies so far beyond human discourses that it becomes impossible to reduce it to discursive forms. The human becomes a *jivan mukt*, one who has attained liberation while remaining alive in a corporeal state, and will end the cycle of rebirths after death when the soul eventually merges with the divine light (*joti jot samana*). The realization depends on the karmic accounts and the divine grace which will fall upon those who are blessed with the perception to understand the presence of God in the creation and within the spiritual self. The efforts which humans make to attain the liberated state are practices of performing good action, praising God, and meditating upon the divine name and words in the company of truthful others. The seekers pursue the path of devotion while retaining an active householder life without having recourse to renunciation.

The previous sections of this chapter have highlighted a few analytical reflections concerning the construction and attribution of meanings to religious acts in the Sikh life. The concluding part will project the search for meanings on a much broader screen and question the aims of engaging in devotional practices in the first place. Do Sikhs perceive much higher objectives for their religious practices? What is the aim of devotion? In the semi-structured interviews with local Sikhs at Varanasi, the respondents were asked to develop these questions from a personal point of view. What came forward was not a single and collectively shared soteriological doctrine, but a variety of beliefs about the purposes and effects of one's devotional efforts in the present life and for destiny after death. The purpose of devotion visualized by local people is not necessarily to "burn" one's karma to end the cycle of rebirths, but to accumulate good karma for a fair rebirth. Moreover, the human life and world was, by considerably many, presented in terms of a text. The human destiny is a divinely pre-written record, which during a life time is filled with inscriptions of one's action, and especially those which involve an engagement in the sacred words of Guru Granth Sahib. The event of death marks a closing of the book, when the divine will make a balancing of accounts and write a new fate. The human life itself is portrayed like a reading and writing activity of both divine and human agents. These religious ideas, we shall see, are also found in the metaphors of the Sikh scripture.

#### THE METAPHORS OF A TEXT

The figurative language in Guru Granth Sahib frequently returns to the activity of reading and writing texts. The pencil and paper, the inkpot and ink are scribal instruments which the Sikh Gurus utilize as metaphors of more cosmological workings. In the writings of Guru Nanak, for instance, the whole creation emerges and rests on a written eternal divine order (*hukam*) stemming from God.<sup>790</sup> The divine

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<sup>790</sup> GGS: 688.

creator holds a pen by which the creation is inscribed and made manifest. God is the active scribe (*likhari*) who exercises the art of writing (*likhai*) to make the whole universe a text, as a self-manifestation of the divine author. "God is both the tablet, the pen and what is written upon it," the Guru writes.<sup>791</sup> The only one who remains unwritten in the textual cosmos is the formless and invisible divine agent.<sup>792</sup> As a part of this creation, humans and human conditions are depicted with similar metaphors. In several hymns the Gurus mention the hidden fate or record engraved on the forehead of every human born into this world.<sup>793</sup> Guru Nanak describes the human body as a paper upon which God has written inscriptions that will register both good and bad acts with the ink of the mind.<sup>794</sup> Humans cannot erase this engraving since it is written in accordance with the will of God and thus follows a divine order. With a written record of their destiny people will enter and leave this world.<sup>795</sup> The wise ones will understand their fate while the foolish remain blind to what has been written.<sup>796</sup> The Gurus present the divine inscriptions on humans as a karmic record of previous and ongoing actions of the individual human life.<sup>797</sup> The record has been written according to past deeds and will be the seed of virtues and vices in the present life.<sup>798</sup> Only in a liberated state, when the human soul unites with God, will no more records be written. At this moment, when there is no more birth and death, the karmic accounts on the human destiny are torn up into nothingness.<sup>799</sup> As Guru Arjan rhetorically asks: "What can Dharmaraj do now? All my accounts have been torn up."<sup>800</sup> The human text has reached its end and the divine judge has torn the record to pieces.<sup>801</sup> Like God, the human soul becomes an unwritten record when it merges with the divine author.

In the intertextual world of local Sikhs, it is not surprising to find models of personhood and the post-mortem destiny based on the Gurus' textual metaphors. Popular conceptions of the human person often highlight *atma* – the soul or spiritual self – that will pass through the cycle of births and rebirths, in each of which is co-coined a body (*tan*, *sharir*) and mind/heart (*man*). The cycle of transmigration creates accumulation of behavioral consequences that determine the future destiny and rebirths. Many of my informants would talk about this predestination in terms of a

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<sup>791</sup> GGS: 1291.

<sup>792</sup> GGS: 4, 412.

<sup>793</sup> GGS: 74, 359, 689, 1009, 1029.

<sup>794</sup> GGS: 662, 990.

<sup>795</sup> GGS: 636.

<sup>796</sup> GGS: 662.

<sup>797</sup> GGS: 763, 1110, 1169.

<sup>798</sup> GGS: 59.

<sup>799</sup> GGS: 79.

<sup>800</sup> GGS: 614, 1348.

<sup>801</sup> GGS: 697.

divine writing (*likhna*).<sup>802</sup> The formless God writes the human fate – including birth, social status, marriage partner, life span, and so on – and everything to be experienced in life is contained in the divine script imprinted on the human forehead.<sup>803</sup> At the time of death the script is carried to a conclusion when the *atma* leaves the body and travels to a divine abode. My informants were of divergent opinions concerning the place at which the *atma* would reach and the events taking place there. Many compared the divine place to a court room in which all deeds of the soul would be scrutinized and reported to God. To illustrate the advanced bureaucracy in this court some incorporated mythological motives and figures, derived from the Sikh scripture, into their descriptions. Dharmaraj is the righteous judge who administers justice on an order of God. He is both reading and judging accounts of people's deeds. Another official is Yama, the Lord or Messenger of Death, with his domain in the south or Yumpur, the city of death. At the time of death Yama grabs people and smashes their heads with his club. The accountant in celestial service is Chitra Gupt, who keeps all records and will weigh the good and bad karma of people to be reported to Dharmaraj. Whether local Sikhs perceive these figures as real or mythological, they agree that the interlude between death and a new rebirth involves a divine judgement of one's actions in the present life. Their explanations are strongly suggestive of the divine as the cosmic overseer of justice. An elderly Sikh man said:

When a person reaches the court of God his accounts will be checked. What he has done, how many times he has recited the name of God will be seen, no other things. According to that he will get another body, another birth.

The soul appears like a book, collecting action to be balanced after death. The cosmic judge will read and evaluate all deeds performed within the boundaries of the fate and then pass a sentence that sets the blueprint of the next rebirth. The human life becomes a text ordained and written by God.<sup>804</sup>

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<sup>802</sup> In Hindi the verb *likhna* also means “to ordain (fate, by writing on the brow)” (McGreggor 1997: 895).

<sup>803</sup> This is similar to what Daniel has found among Tamils, who talk about a “head writing” of God. He writes: “Tamils believe that at the time of birth Katavul [God] writes a script on every individual's head and that the course that each individual's life takes, to the very last detail, is determined by this script” (Daniel 1984: 4). Likewise, Gold notes that Rajasthani villagers believe that the human fate is inscribed on the forehead of infants (Gold 1988: 10).

<sup>804</sup> It is noteworthy that local Sikhs occasionally use the word *bhog*, with the dual meaning “ending” and “enjoyment”, to designate death ceremonies for humans. The same word is also used for the solemnized reading of the concluding part of Guru Granth Sahib, when family and friends are invited to enjoy the “fruits” of a successfully completed recitation. The application of the word seems to suggest an analogy between the ending of human life and the ending of a recitation from the sacred scripture.

### TEXTUALIZING ONESELF

But humans are also given opportunities to deliberately praise the divine name and recite divine words and thereby obtain possibilities to influence the present and future destiny. Some religious practices in the Sikh life seem to rest on the idea that the pre-ordained fate written by God cannot be changed but modified if God grants favours in exchange of devotion. In the Guru Granth Sahib, the metaphor of a text is equally much used for descriptions of human devotion to God. In one hymn, for instance, Guru Nanak writes:

Burn emotional attachment and grind it into ink. Transform your intelligence into the purest of paper. Make the love of the Lord your pen, and let your consciousness be the scribe. Then, seek the Guru's instruction, and record these deliberations. Write the praises of the Name of the Lord, write over and over again that He has no end or limitation. O Baba, write such an account, that when it is asked for, it will bring the mark of truth.<sup>805</sup>

Devotional activities of human agents are dressed in the image of an active scribal activity. Another *gurbani* hymn states that people can write the divine name and praises of God on the canvas of the human body with the pen of their tongues and the inkpot of their minds.<sup>806</sup>

While God writes the fate on the human forehead, humans have the capacity to "write" good karma into their records. Occasionally, local Sikhs make the parable between the human interior and the space of a gurdwara. Just like a gurdwara emptied of the Guru and divine words would cease to be a gurdwara in a true sense, so is the spiritual centre of humans empty unless it is filled with *gurbani* and praises to God. Regular recitations and reflections upon the verses in Guru Granth Sahib, repetitions and remembrance of the divine name in *simran* practices, and selfless service to the Guru, the congregation, and people in the society are the means to transform the human inner self and collect good actions to be registered in the accounts at the divine court. Sikh worship seems, from this perspective, to presume a performative model according to which spiritual exercises are believed to result in some kind of expanded sense of textuality and embodiment. Through regular engagements in the words and teaching of Guru Granth Sahib, human worshippers make the Guru present and textualize their interior. The practices of memorizing, reciting, and reflecting upon the words in the mind/heart and taking the nectar-water of words into the body, make humans embodiments of the Guru words. The term *gurmukh* has several shades of signification in the Sikh teaching, but in colloquial speech it generally signifies a guru-oriented person who scrupulously follows the Guru's teaching to become imbued with the words. The mind/heart of the *gurmukh* becomes completely shaped

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<sup>805</sup> GGS: 16.

<sup>806</sup> GGS: 636.



with the divine words through continuous meditation on God. It is a progressively unfolding realization of one's own embodiment of the divine words, which is dependent on the grace of God and a spiritual discipline involving meditative and ritual techniques to devotionally engage in the Guru and the Guru's teaching. From this understanding, the spiritual path of a *gurmukh* concerns embodied practices which manifest and make the human inner self permeated with words of ontologically divine origin.

Many of my interlocutors also reported stories of how the bones of spiritually gifted people were imprinted with the *Ik omkar* sign, the opening syllable of Guru Granth Sahib, after their death. A middle-aged Sikh woman recalled the following story:

My great grandfather's brother was a very religious man. He was doing *puja-path* [worship-reading] all the time. When he died and they were picking up his bones they found *Ik Omkar* written on his forehead in three places. When they were cleaning them [the bones] they were getting darker. It looked like someone had carved it on his forehead.

To have the first character of the Sikh scripture inscribed on the forehead is the ultimate evidence of a *gurmukh* who has attained spiritual liberation. Other informants told similar stories of how people longed to get an auspicious sight (*darshan*) of the engraved bones of the liberated. These people are believed to have perfected and purified their inner self with *gurbani* to such an extent that even the remains they leave behind will be marked with Guru Nanak's formula of the one and formless God. They had textualized themselves to become unwritten records and their bones indicated the mergence with God.

#### DEVOTION CONTINUED

Surmounting life and death for a final liberation, however, is not necessarily visualized as an attainable goal by local people, nor is it considered to be the ultimate strive of their devotion. When my interlocutors at Varanasi were asked to explain their personal ideas and desires behind religious activities, only a few imagined an end to the cycle of rebirths when the human soul unites with God. On the contrary, most found this interpretation of *mukti* remote and unattainable in the present dark and degenerating age of *kaliyug*. Only those who are exceptionally spiritually gifted and had given up all desires and attachments to the world can be judged righteous in the divine court and merge with God. A few saw transmigration as an everlasting process without end. A Sikh man in his twenties said: "If God wants you he can call you. But people never get *mukti*. There is a cycle of 84 *laks* of life-forms. We are just running in that. We never get rid of it."

If Sikhs do not perceive their religious actions as strives to dissolve worldly bondages and merge with a divine power, then which are the ultimate goals they

have? Again, what is the aim of devotion, according to local Sikhs? To exemplify the ultimate meanings people may assign worship, I will below quote a few responses that emerged when my interlocutors were asked to explain their aims and goals of devotion.

*A young woman*

For peace of mind. I cannot say it is to become immortal. No one will gain immortality in the present age.

*A young man*

There are two aims of devotion: *moksh* and that life proceeds happily. A person wishes to spend his life happily. To reach God he worships the Guru. When a person goes on this path he wants to get a happy life in the next birth, he wants to be born into a rich family. If his [present] life passes happily he wants to be happy in the next life too. A suffering person does not want that life again, he wants a happy life.

*A middle-aged woman*

My attention is on God and I do as well as I can. Doing good things is a duty. I do not care what I will gain. I just do it. I do not ask anything from God. Just do good work and do not care about the results.

*A middle-aged woman*

I want to be closer to him. When you are praising God for his sake, not because you want favours, then you are closer to him. We are seldom praising God for God's sake. We make God a shelter for personal requirements. When I recite *gurbani* and listen to *kirtan* I feel like I am being closer to God. I try to follow the Guru's teaching, I try to do that, because otherwise my mind would be completely caught up in the daily duties.

*A middle-aged woman*

We read in *gurbani* that by doing recitations we will get this, by doing another thing we will gain that. Therefore we carry out devotion. We think that God will give us something in the coming age.

*A middle-aged man*

For the peace and prosperity [*sukhshanti*] of my family. For my peace and prosperity in this life.

*A middle-aged man*

All this is for not meeting with troubles. That everything goes well with my small family. That my children will live better after me. It is also for the next

life... that I do not have to suffer in hell. By doing *seva* you can pass by the rebirths [*yonis*], by doing that you get over them.

*An elderly woman*

To gain happiness for the children and peace of the house. To gain good things for the next life.

*An elderly woman*

You will always face troubles, but you can easily get over them if you are taking the name of God. By taking the name of God all troubles go away.

*An elderly man*

The place from which you came, to that place you will return. The rainwater falls to the ground, goes into a river, which merges with the ocean. By the power of the sun it will get back to the sky to become rainwater again. It is just a play [*khel*]. The deeper you will go into it the more complicated it will be. No one is able to tell you that path. Only when God gives you grace you will know it.

*An elderly man*

For pureness of mind/heart. For good in next life. If I am reciting Ram, Ram, Ram it will bring me on the path of God. It will free me from bad thoughts and tension. Who has seen the next life? We have to do good karma, not be cheating. If I cheat then I will feel like a cheater and I think God will punish me for that. If you do good action then I will get a good rebirth.

In the divine play the world is seen as the arena for rewards and punishments of conducts in this life and future life-forms that will be decided after the event of death. Rather than visualizing a release from the cycle of transmigration, which is difficult or even impossible to attain in the present age, the majority of respondents seemed to define the ultimate goal of devotion in terms of rewards in this and coming lives. The care of one's beloved was especially a strong motive, sometimes more powerful than desired individual gains. Considerably many saw their devotional practices as attempts to protect and secure the wellbeing of themselves and their family members. Being reborn into a human life-form in the next life was the primary goal of devotion. While some expressed their wishes to meet with somewhat better conditions, concerning health and prosperity, others emphasized that only in a human birth is the soul able to sustain and develop a closer relationship with the Guru.

In a longer exposition a middle-aged man distinguished between different significations of the word *mukti*, of which some were in a human life-form and only one implicated a release from the cycle of rebirths. Liberation was, in his view, to be reborn with a human body and intellect since only this life-form provided possibilities to praise and remember God, perform recitations, and receive *darshan* of God. He also

remarked that not even the Sikh Gurus wanted *mukti* but only to “get a place and sit at God’s feet”. Those who have been graced with spiritual knowledge desire nothing but to express devotion to God. As was reflected in some responses, the spiritual gains of devotion are considered incomprehensible to ordinary humans, and to have no other intention but to praise and thank God is an ultimate goal in itself. To fully engage in worship acts without desires, not even the wish for a favourable rebirth or spiritual liberation, is considered a sign of humbleness in compliance with the Guru’s teaching and the divine will. It is an effort to stay detached from worldly desires and completely sublimate the self to the divine, while living an active social life for others in the world. To sustain a devotional relationship to God and the Guru – who illuminates the spiritual path and burns the self-centeredness that keeps humans alienated from God – becomes both the means and the end in itself. As the eternal Guru dwells within the divinely revealed words and teaching enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, devotional Sikhs will continue to recite, sing, explicate, and meditate upon the verses in the scripture and honor the physical text. The human-divine activities of “writing” and “reading” religious action will continue, and these processes mark the end.

## SAMMANFATTNING PÅ SVENSKA (SUMMARY IN SWEDISH)

Sikhernas heliga skrift, Guru Granth Sahib, står onekligen i centrum för deras religiösa liv. Skriften ligger till grund för religiösa föreställningar och värderingar och i dess närvaro utförs nästan varje sikhisk ritual och ceremoni. I den mest betydande definitionen är ett sikhiskt tempel – *gurdwara* – den plats där Guru Granth Sahib dagligen görs närvarande för att hålla ett kungligt hov. Tidigt på morgonen installeras skriften på en upphöjd och utsmyckad tron för att ta emot tillbedjare. Under dagen besöker sikherna gurdwaran för att ödmjukt närma sig skriften och framföra böner och offergåvor, som om de fick audiens hos en kunglig regent. I gudstjänster reciterar och sjunger sikherna hymner från skriften och utforskar dess semantiska innehåll genom muntliga exegetiska utläggningar för förstäelse och vägledning i det sociala livet. Efter skymningen förs skriften ceremoniellt till ett speciellt sovrum där den placeras på en himmelssäng för nattlig vila. Sikhernas användning av Guru Granth Sahib antyder att de har tagit uppfattningen om en helig skrift längre än någon annan religiös tradition genom att behandla Guru Granth Sahib som en levande guru. Att vara sikh – en lärjunge till gurun – innebär att utveckla både ett religiöst, didaktiskt, och socialt förhållande till den heliga skriften.

Avhandlingen *Inside the Guru's Gate: Ritual Uses of Text among the Sikhs in Varanasi* undersöker sikhernas religiösa praktik utifrån en lokal sikhisk kommunitet i Varanasi i norra Indien. Undersökningen är baserad på mer än tre års fältarbete med eget deltagande, observation och intervjuer med lekmän och religiösa specialister som är verksamma vid två sikhiska gurdwaras i Varanasi. Studiet av sikhismen har länge negligerat sikhernas religiösa praktik i offentliga och privata sfärer till förmån för historiska, teologiska, politiska aspekter av traditionen. De mest enkla, självklara och samtidigt betydelsefulla religiösa handlingar som sikherna utför dagligen i hemmet och i gurdwaran har givits liten uppmärksamhet i forskarstudier, om inte handlingarna har kunnat framlägga storslagna symboliska meningar som bekräftat sociologiska eller historiska teorier. På liknande vis har forskare närmat sig Guru Granth Sahib främst utifrån ett historiskt och textligt perspektiv, som en samling av de mänskliga guruernas skrivna verk, medan minimalt intresse har visats för samtida föreställningar om skriftens roll och identitet i sikhernas religiösa liv och de muntliga traditionerna att förmedla och framföra guruernas hymner. Den etnografiska studien *Inside the Guru's Gate* är ett försök att belysa ett negligerat fält i studiet av sikhismen genom att lyfta fram religiösa handlingar som lekmän och specialister inom en sikhisk församling i Varanasi själva anser betydelsefulla. Undersökningen inriktar sig på sikhernas mångfasetterade religiösa bruk och förhållningssätt till Guru Granth Sahib och andra texter som lokalt tillskrivs *gurbani* status, det vill säga ord som har yttrats och nedtecknats av de mänskliga sikhiska guruerna. Genom religiösa diskurser och rituella handlingar skapar och bekräftar lokala sikher föreställningar om Guru Granth

Sahib betraktad som en skrift vari ontologiskt gudomliga ord manifestas och en andlig lära förkroppsligar de historiska guruernas uppenbarelseerfarenheter. Samtidigt anses skriften vara den nu levande gurun med både andlig auktoritet och social agens att vägleda sikher och upprätta förbindelser mellan människa och Gud. Utifrån den tredelade uppfattningen om skriftens identitet kan också sikhiska ritualer indelas i olika typer av religiösa handlingar som syftar till att vörda den rådande världsliga guruns skriftform och ge skriften en aktiv roll i sikhernas sociala liv, samt frambringa det som trots allt är den eviga gurun – de gudomliga orden förmedlade genom de historiska guruernas lära i Guru Granth Sahib.

I granskningen av sikhernas religiösa förhållningssätt till Guru Granth Sahib och deras ritualiserade textanvändning intar undersökningen ett teoretiskt perspektiv som är grundat på performance- och ritualteori. Utifrån Baumans grundläggande idé om att levande muntliga framföranden av texter är kulturspecifika händelser som framkallar speciella tolkningsramar än den rent textliga förmedlingen, analyserar studien olika aspekter av textbruk varigenom sikher i en mångfald av handlingskontexter skapar relationer och ytor för interaktion med Guru Granth Sahib och andra *gurbani*-texter. Att exempelvis recitera en hymn eller hela skriften i muntliga framföranden är inte bara ett mer estetiskt tilltalande sätt att förmedla textens meningsinnehåll, utan blir genom framförandets formaliserade karaktär och nya tolkningsramar en religiös handling som anses ha kraft och agens att kunna åstadkomma något i den sociala världen. Recitera guruernas ord blir en performativ handling med möjlighet att påverka aktören på ett andligt, materiellt och socialt plan. Med utgångspunkt i Humphrey & Laidlaws teori om rituella handlingars stipulerade och arketypiska karaktär betraktar studien dessa olika typer av funktioner och förväntade resultat av religiösa handlingar som konstruktioner, vilka människor gör utifrån kontextuella element och tillskriver sina handlingar. Stora delar av studien är ändå deskriptiv till sin karaktär eftersom etnografiskt material om levd religiös praktik bland sikher i specifika kulturmiljöer nödvändigtvis måste föregå de mer sofistikerade teoretiska utläggningarna.

Arbetet är indelat i fem kapitel som stegvis beskriver hur religiös praktik skapar närvaro och agens av de mänskliga guruerna, Guru Granth Sahib och gudomliga ord och kunskap inneboende i skriften. För att kontextualisera sikhernas närvaro i Varanasi presenterar det första kapitlet församlingens historia, utifrån tillgängliga textliga och muntliga källor, och dess sociala sammansättning och organisation idag. Vidare diskuterar kapitlet emisk historiografi, det vill säga hur sikherna har skapat en kollektiv och betydelsefull historia som utgör en motkraft till den mönstergivande "stora berättelsen" om den lokala hinduiska kulturen. Istället för att hylla guden Shivas bragder, floden Ganges andligt renande vatten och brahminernas dominans, har sikherna skapat en tolkning av det förgångna som undergräver hinduiska kategorier för att bekräfta de sikhiska guruernas överlägsenhet. Återberättandet av denna historia och utförandet av vördnadshandlingar till platser och relikier som är förbundna med sikhernas guruer manifesterar deras närvaro och kraft i staden. För en sikhisk

minoritet i en hinduisk pilgrimsstad kan den emiska historieskrivningen fungera som ett anspråk på synlighet, identitet och representation i majoritetssamhället.

Avhandlingens andra kapitel beskriver olika lokala uppfattningar och förhållningssätt till Guru Granth Sahib och belyser hur religiösa diskurser bäddar in skriften i ett nätverk av relationer som bekräftar dess världsliga och utomvärldsliga identitet och kraft. Skriften har onto-teologiska relationer till det gudomliga, historiska relationer till de mänskliga guruerna och sociala relationer till sikhiska lärjungar. Från ett analytiskt perspektiv är det möjligt att påstå att sikhiska diskurser om Guru Granth Sahibs identitet genomsyras av ett relationstänkande. Skriftens relation till de historiska guruerna gör att Guru Granth Sahib delar samma andliga kraft och "själ" som sina mänskliga föregångare, även om den har en skriftlig kropp. Genom att skriften av tradition ingår i en mänsklig successionsföljd har den ärvt ett antropomorfiskt habitus och personifieras av sikhiska anhängare. Sikherna både skapar och bekräftar skriftens auktoritet genom att arrangera och dekorerar platser och rum i gurdwaran och utföra värdiga handlingar i dess närvaro. De dagliga liturgierna i gurdwaran kan betraktas som rituella metoder att hölja in Guru Granth Sahib i en dygnsrytm och rutiner, som gör det möjligt för anhängare att kontinuerligt uppenbara dess inre lära och skapa relationer till gurun. Kapitlet diskuterar också hur lekmän uppfattar sin identitet som lärjungar och hur de förklarar den religiösa logiken bakom handlingar och beteenden som syftar till att tjäna skriften likt en högaktad gäst eller en världslig härskare. I gurdwaran finns också olika professionella specialister, som recitatörer, musikanter och berättande exegeter, vars främsta uppgifter är att reproducera skriftens ord och uttolla dess lära. Då dessa specialister är ansvariga för att omvandla den skriftliga texten till muntliga framföranden undersöker kapitlet vilken utbildning och motivation specialisterna har för att ge sig in på en religiös yrkesbana och vilket ansvar och kvalifikationer lekmän hänför till deras uppgifter och roller. Den slutliga delen av kapitlet beskriver hur sikher ger den skriftliga formen av Guru Granth Sahib ett världsligt liv genom att skapa skriften i tryckpressarna i Amritsar, arrangera påkostade processioner för transporter, införliva den i sociala gemenskaper genom formella installationer och slutligen rituellt kremara gamla och obrukbara skrifter i en modern dödsceremoni. Den religiösa praktiken betonar att Guru Granth Sahib inte är en vanlig bok utan en personifierad guru med suverän status och auktoritet.

Det tredje kapitlet av avhandlingen fokuserar på sex vanliga former av religiösa framföranden – recitation, sång, exegetiska berättelser, meditation, böner, och socialt arbete – genom vilka lokala sikher återger orden i Guru Granth Sahib och andra *gurbani* texter, tillämpar guruernas lära i sociala handlingar och upprättar kommunikation med Gud. Kapitlet diskuterar de formella särdrag och konventioner som aktualiseras när olika framföranden omvandlar det skrivna ordet till muntlig förmedling och social handling. Denna del av avhandlingen beskriver också kulturspecifika tolkningar och föreställningar om de olika framförandena och om de gurbani hymner som används. Ur en religiös synvinkel kan framförandena representera en av sikherna kontinuerligt realiserad uppenbarelseplan, enligt vilken guruns lära reproduceras genom recitation (*path*) och sånger (*kirtan*), uttolkas och utvecklas i muntliga utlägg-

ningar (*katha*), ihågkoms och begrundas i människans inre (*simran*), för att tillämpas i osjälviska handlingar (*seva*) som gynnar andra människor. En muntlig läsning av den standardiserade sikhbönen (*Ardas*) kontextualiserar de religiösa framförandena och tydliggör, för en gudomlig adressat, vad som händer och utförs i sikhernas sociala värld.

I det fjärde kapitlet övergår avhandlingen till deskriptiva skildringar av ceremonier som sikherna i Varanasi utför i samband med olika stadier i livet, som födelse, giftermål och död, högtider de firar enligt den sikhiska och nationella festkalendern, samt olika religiösa praktiker som tillämpas när människor erfar obalans i det sociala livet eller upplever fysisk eller mental ohälsa. I ritualteoriska studier delas ritualer vanligen in i olika typologier som övergångsriter, kalendariska riter, krisriter, offeriter och så vidare, vilka emellanåt kan ge intrycket att kategorierna avser enskilda rituella handlingar. Istället omsluter en högtid eller övergångsrit oftast ett kluster av olika rituella akter, vilka utförs parallellt eller i följd och tillsammans skapar en större rituell struktur eller ceremoni. Kapitlets beskrivningar av sikhiska ceremonier utgår från traditionella ritualtyper, men behandlar dessa som olika exempel på kontextspecifika händelser som tillhandahåller det sociala ramverket för olika religiösa framföranden att återge orden och läran i Guru Granth Sahib och visa vördnad för skriftens fysiska närvaro.

Det sista kapitlet av avhandlingen är genomgående teoretiskt och uppmärksammar framförallt frågor om rituella handlingars mening och betydelse. Den teoretiska diskussion utgår ifrån att meningar inte är beståndsdelar som bestämmer de formaliserade och ritualiserade handlingarnas identitet, utan mänskliga konstruktioner som skapas utifrån kontextuella faktorer. Människor kan ange mångfaldiga och skiftande meningar – religiösa, symboliska, social och så vidare – vilka de hämtar från diskurser och händelser som omger deras handlingar. Aktörerna representerar olika typer av meningar, inför sig själv och inför andra, och sedan tillskriver sina handlingar dessa meningar. Medan några sociala och religiösa meningar har blivit högt stipulerade av den sikhiska traditionen, så är andra konstant föränderliga beroende på skiftande kontexter och diskurser. Sikher anser även att Guru Granth Sahib är en utesluten källa till alla livets meningar. Verser i skriften tolkas som guruernas anvisningar om vilka resultat eller meningar en viss rituell handling kan ha. Således bidrar både skriften, traditionen och olika situationsbundna kontexter av framföranden till konstruktioner av individuella och kollektiva meningar som gör religiösa handlingar meningsfyllda.

Avhandlingen *Inside the Guru's Gate* är sålunda ett försök att belysa hur sikher inom en lokal gemenskap i norra Indien uppfattar, behandlar och använder Guru Granth Sahib, som anses vara en levande guru med agens och auktoritet, till att förmedla gudomlig kunskap och möjliggöra relationer till en osynlig Gud. Religiösa handlingar i gurdwaran och hemmet både skapar och bekräftar guruns närvaro och kapacitet att agera och interagera med sikhiska lärjungar i en mänsklig och socialt betingad värld. Det är dessa handlingar som bringar liv till en kanoniserad skrift.



## APPENDIX 1

## GURPURUBS IN THE NANAKSHAHI CALENDAR

FESTIVAL	THEME	NANAKSHAHI (Solar dates)	CE
<b>CHET (MARCH/APRIL)</b>			
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 7</i>	Guru Hari Rai's installation	Chet 1	March 14
<i>Joti joti samae patshah 6</i>	Guru Hargobind's death	Chet 6	March 19
<b>VAISAKH (APRIL/MAY)</b>			
<i>Joti joti samae patshah 2</i>	Guru Angad's death	Vaisakh 3	April 16
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 3</i>	Guru Amardas' installation	Vaisakh 3	April 16
<i>Joti joti samae patshah 8</i>	Guru Harkrishan's death	Vaisakh 3	April 16
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 9</i>	Guru Tegh Bahadur's installation	Vaisakh 3	April 16
<i>Prakash divas patshah 2</i>	Guru Angad's birth	Vaisakh 5	April 18
<i>Prakash divas patshah 9</i>	Guru Tegh Bahadur's birth	Vaisakh 5	April 18
<i>Prakash divas patshah 5</i>	Guru Arjan's birth	Vaisakh 19	May 2
<b>JETH (MAY/JUNE)</b>			
<i>Prakash divas patshah 3</i>	Guru Amardas' birth	Jeth 9	May 23
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 6</i>	Guru Hargobind's installation	Jeth 28	June 11
<b>HAR (JUNE/JULY)</b>			
<i>Shahidi divas</i>	Martyrdom of Guru Arjan <i>Guru Arjan Dev</i>	Har 2	June 16
<i>Prakash divas patshah 6</i>	Guru Hargobind's birth	Har 21	July 5
<b>SAVAN (JULY/AUGUST)</b>			
<i>Miri-piri divas</i>	Celebration of Miri-Piri Guru Hargobind	Savan 6	July 21
<i>Prakash divas patshah 8</i>	Guru Harkrishan's birth	Savan 8	July 23

#### BHADON (AUGUST/SEPTEMBER)

<i>Sampurnta divas</i> <i>Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji</i>	Completion of Guru Granth Sahib in 1604 CE	Bhadon 15	August 30
<i>Shri Guru Granth Sahib ji</i> <i>Pahila Prakash</i>	Guru Granth Sahib's first opening in 1604 CE	Bhadon 17	September 1

#### ASU (SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER)

<i>Joti joti samae patshah 3</i>	Guru Amardas' death	Asu 2	September 16
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 4</i>	Guru Ramdas' installation	Asu 2	September 16
<i>Joti joti samae patshah 4</i>	Guru Ramdas' death	Asu 2	September 16
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 5</i>	Guru Arjan's installation	Asu 2	September 16
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 2</i>	Guru Angad's installation	Asu 4	September 18
<i>Joti joti samae patshah 1</i>	Guru Nanak's death	Asu 8	September 22
<i>Prakash divas patshah 4</i>	Guru Ramdas' birth	Asu 25	October 9

#### KATAK (OCTOBER/NOVEMBER)

<i>Joti joti samae patshah 7</i>	Guru Har Rai's death	Katak 6	October 20
<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 8</i>	Guru Harkrishan's installation	Katak 6	October 20
<i>Gurgaddi divas</i> <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	Installation of Guru Granth Sahib	Katak 6	October 20
<i>Joti joti samae patshah</i>	Guru Gobind Singh's death	Katak 7	October 21

#### MAGHAR (NOVEMBER/DECEMBER)

<i>Gurgaddi divas patshah 10</i>	Guru Gobind Singh's installation	Maghar 11	November 24
<i>Shahidi divas Shri</i> <i>Guru Tegh Bahadur</i>	Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur	Maghar 11	November 24
<i>Prakash divas patshah 1</i>	Guru Nanak's birth <sup>807</sup>	Maghar 12	November 26

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<sup>807</sup> Sikh communities also continue to celebrate the birthday of Guru Nanak on the full-moon day in the month *Katak* according to the lunar calendar.

*POH* (DECEMBER/JANUARY)

*Prakash divas patshah* 10    Guru Gobind Singh's birth    Poh 23    January 5

*MAGH* (JANUARY/FEBRUARY)

*Prakash divas patshah* 7    Guru Hari Rai's birth    Magh 19    January 31

*PHAGAN* (FEBRUARY/MARCH)

No *gurpurub* in this month.

**CULTURAL FESTIVALS OBSERVED BY THE SIKHS IN VARANASI**  
(Chronological order)

NAME OF FESTIVALS	MONTH/DATE	THEME AND FEATURES
<i>Tij</i> (Third)	<i>Savan</i> Dark fortnight day 1	Women gather in the evening singing songs and dancing. In Varanasi the association of professional Punjabi women called “Varanasi Female City Industry Business Association” ( <i>Varanasi Mahila Nagar Udhio Vayapar Mandal</i> ), organizes a yearly function for its members. They create painted decorations ( <i>rangoli</i> ), dye their hands with henna, play music and arrange games.
<i>Raksha Bandhan</i> (Charm Tying)	<i>Savan</i> Full-moon day	Sisters tie a thread around the wrist of their brothers for protection and well-wishes.
<i>Pitra Paksh</i> (Fortnight of Ancestors)	<i>Asu</i> Dark fortnight day 1 to Bright fortnight day 1	Sikhs invite five people from the gurdwara to offer them food in the name of a deceased family member.
<i>Navratra</i> (Nine Nights)	<i>Asu</i> Bright fortnight days 1 – 9	Women keep <i>vrat</i> , fasting or abstention from some food. Children representing goddesses are invited to houses and given offerings.
<i>Dassehra</i> (Tenth)	<i>Asu</i> Bright fortnight day 10	Worship to goddess Durga. In Varanasi different clubs organize <i>Durga puja</i> which local people attend. On the day of <i>Dassehra</i> the local Ram-lila programs, dramatizations of the <i>Ramayana</i> story, celebrates the victory of Ram over Ravan.
<i>Karva Chauth</i> (Pitcher Fortnight)	<i>Katak</i> Dark fortnight day 3	Women observe a fast and worship the moon for the welfare and long life of their husbands.

<i>Diwali</i>	<i>Katak</i> New-moon day	People perform <i>puja</i> to Lakshmi and Ganesh. They wash their houses and invite Lakshmi to the house by lighting candles.
<i>Lohri</i>	<i>Poh</i> First day of the solar month	People celebrate the birth of the first son by lighting bonfires in the evening and singing songs.
<i>Vasant Panchami</i> (Spring Fifth)	<i>Magh</i> Bright fortnight day 5	The festival for the beginning of spring. People dress up in yellow clothes and worship Sarasvati, the goddess of knowledge.
<i>Holi</i>	<i>Phagan</i> Full-moon day	In the morning people play with colors. People set up a bonfire called <i>Holika</i> , around which they circulate while giving offerings.



## GLOSSARY OF SELECTED FOREIGN TERMS

- Adi Granth** – the “principal” Sikh scripture  
**Agan Bhet samskar** – cremation ritual of the Sikh scripture  
**Agni bhent** – the offering of fire  
**Agni samskar** – the fire ritual, cremation of humans  
**Akal** – eternal  
**Akhand path** – unbroken recitations of the whole Guru Granth Sahib  
**Amrit** – immortal nectar  
**Amritdhari** – a Sikh who has taken amrit and undergone the Khande di pahul ceremony  
**Amrit sanskar** – the ceremony of Khalsa initiation  
**Amritvela** – the nectar hours during the last watch of the night  
**Anand karaj** – the Sikh wedding ceremony  
**Antim bheta** – the last offering to a deceased family member  
**Ardas** – the Sikh supplication  
**Ashuddh** – impure  
**Arora** – a Punjabi mercantile caste  
**Arti** – the Hindu ceremony of circulating a lamp before a deity  
**Atma** – human soul  
**Bani** – sound, speech, designates the utterances of the Sikh Gurus  
**Barat** – the groom’s procession to the bride’s place before a wedding  
**Bedi** – a Khatri sub-caste to which Guru Nanak belonged  
**Bhagat** – saint poet  
**Bhai** – brother, a title of reverence conferred on male Sikhs  
**Bhakti** – devotion  
**Bhog** – pleasure, the ceremonial conclusion of recitations from Guru Granth Sahib  
**Bhog lagana** – the act to offer food to the Guru and thereby make it consecrated  
**Bhutpret** – ghost  
**Brahm gian** – knowledge of God  
**Brahman bhojan** – the Hindu ceremony of feeding Brahmans after a death  
**Buri nazar** – the evil eye  
**Chand** – the moon  
**Chandoa** – the canopy placed over Guru Granth Sahib  
**Charan-pahul** – ceremonial foot initiation  
**Chaunke charna** – entering the kitchen, the ceremony which marks the end to the period of impurity following childbirth  
**Chaunki** – a division of the day during which *kirtan* is performed  
**Chauri** – whisk made of yak hair or peacock feathers which is waved over the Sikh scripture  
**Chimta** – instrument made of tongs with jingling metal discs  
**Chilla** – forty, referring to a forty day-long period of seclusion and meditation

**Dan** – donations  
**Dandaut** – the bodily act of saluting by full prostration  
**Darshan** – auspicious sight  
**Dastar bandhi** – the turban-tying ceremony  
**Dhamalak bhanana** – the act of breaking an earthen pot on the cremation ground  
**Dhan** – accolade to glorify the Sikh Gurus  
**Dharamsala** – place of worship in the early Sikh community, the hospice inside a gurdwara  
**Dhol** – drum  
**Dholki** – small drum  
**Diksha** – the initiation in which a disciple receives a particular mantra from the teacher as a religious instruction  
**Diya** or **Dipak** – vessel holding oil for a light  
**Doli** – traditional palanquin in which the bride was escorted  
**Gaddi** – seat, throne, position of authority  
**Ghi** – clarified butter  
**Gian** – spiritual knowledge  
**Giani** – a wise and learned man  
**Gotra** or **Got** – exogamous sub-division of a caste group, family, sub-caste, clan  
**Granth** – book  
**Granthi** – the custodian of the Sikh scripture and the gurdwara  
**Gurbani** – the Guru's utterances, compositions credited the status of being composed by the Sikh Gurus.  
**Gurbani Sangit** – music of the Guru's utterances  
**Gurbhakti** – devotion to the Guru  
**Gurdwara** – the gate or threshold of the Guru, the Sikh place of worship  
**Gurmantra** – the mantra of the Guru  
**Gurmat** – the teaching of the Guru  
**Gurmukh** – a faithful follower of the Guru  
**Gurmukhi** – the script of Punjabi in which the Sikh scripture is written  
**Gurpurub** – festivals commemorating the Sikh Gurus and significant events in the Sikh history  
**Guru** – spiritual preceptor  
**Guru-ghar** – the house of the Guru  
**Guru Granth Sahib** – the sacred scripture and guru of the Sikhs  
**Guru Panth** – the Guru manifested in the community of Sikhs  
**Gutka** – small prayer book with gurbani hymns  
**Havan** – fire sacrifice  
**Hukam** – the divine order or command  
**Hukam-nama** – letter of command by the historical Sikh Gurus  
**Ishnan** – bath  
**Jadutona** – practice of magic  
**Jagadi jot** – manifested light



**Jap** – meditation and repetition of God’s name  
**Janam-sakhi** – hagiographic work on the life and deeds of Guru Nanak  
**Jat** – a Punjabi agricultural caste  
**Jati** or **Zat** – position fixed by birth community or caste group, tribe, genus, race  
**Jivanmukt** – a liberated person who is physically alive  
**Jot** – light or spiritual light  
**Joti jot** – merge light into light, the death of a pious person  
**Jot rup/sarup** – the bodily form or manifested shape of spiritual light  
**Jutha** – tasted, edibles made impure by the touch of saliva  
**Kacchaira** – shorts, one of the five Sikh symbols  
**Kalgi** – a plume attached on the turban  
**Kacchi bani** – unripe bani, compositions falsely attributed to the Guru  
**Kaliyug** – the dark age, the fourth and last era of the cosmic cycle  
**Kangha** – comb, one of the five Sikh symbols  
**Kangha samskar** – the ceremony of fixing a comb in the first hair of a small child  
**Kapal kriya** – the act of cracking the skull of the dead person during cremation  
**Kara** – iron or steel bracelet, one of the five Sikh symbols  
**Karah Prashad** – Consecrated food prepared in an iron dish  
**Kar-seva** – collective work service free of charge  
**Katha** – story-telling, exegesis, discourse  
**Kathakar** – the one who performs *katha*  
**Kesh** – unshorn hair, one of the five Sikh symbols  
**Keski** – a small under-turban  
**Khalsa** – the order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699  
**Khanda** – the double-edged sword  
**Khandan** – broken, destroying, contradicting, used for acts contradicting the *rahit*  
**Khande di pahul** – the nectar of the double-edged sword, the Khalsa initiation ceremony  
**Khatiri** – a Punjabi merchantile caste  
**Khulla path** – broken recitation of the complete Sikh scripture  
**Kirpan** – dagger, one of the five Sikh symbols  
**Kirtan** – devotional Sikh music  
**Kurahit** – transgression or violation of the Sikh code of conduct  
**Langar** – common kitchen for serving meals in the gurdwara  
**Lavan** – the act of circumambulating the Sikh scripture during a wedding ceremony  
**Man** – the human mind and heart  
**Mangalcharan** – an opening panegyric, verse, or prayer to religious performances  
**Mangna** – betrothal ceremony  
**Manji Sahib** – the string-bed or lectern on which Guru Granth Sahib is placed, a seat of authority  
**Manmukh** – a self-willed person whose face is turned towards him- or herself  
**Masia**– new-moon day of the lunar calendar  
**Mata** – mother, a title of respect given to an elder and knowledgeable woman

**Matha tekna** – the act of placing the forehead on the ground before the Sikh scripture  
**Matha ragarna** – the act of rubbing the nose against the ground before the Sikh scripture  
**Mehndi** – henna  
**Milni** – the meeting ceremony of kinsmen to be united by a wedding  
**Mukti** – liberation from the cycle of birth and death  
**Mulmantra** – the root mantra which opens the Sikh scripture  
**Nagar Kirtan** – town processions of the Sikh scripture during celebrations of Gurburbs  
**Nam** – the divine name  
**Nam japna** – the act of repeating the divine name  
**Nam karan** – the name-giving ceremony  
**Nam simran** – the act of remembering the divine name by repetition of the divine name  
**Nirmala** – spotless, referring to the order founded by the five saints who Guru Gobind Singh dispatched to Varanasi  
**Nishan Sahib** – the Sikh standard  
**Nitnem** – the daily discipline of reciting gurbani hymns  
**Nitnemi** – a person who observes the nitnem with regularity  
**Ojha** – healer  
**Palki** – the palanquin or litter on which the Sikh scripture is carried  
**Pangat** – the line in which the congregation sits during langar  
**Panj** – five  
**Panj banian** – the five gurbani hymns to recite daily  
**Panjiri** – food causing “hot” effects  
**Panj ishnana** – the five ablutions  
**Panj kakke** or **Panj kakar** – the five external symbols *Amritdhari* Sikh should wear  
**Panj pauri** – the five opening verses of *Japji Sahib*  
**Panj pyare** – the five beloved representing the first five Sikhs who underwent the Khalsa ceremony in 1699  
**Panth** – the path, designating the Sikh community  
**Parikrama** – the clockwise circuit of the Sikh scripture or the gurdwara  
**Path** – recitation  
**Patit** – an apostate or fallen Sikh  
**Phul** – flower, the bones collected after cremation  
**Phulkari** – embroidered cloth  
**Prabhatferi** – morning procession during which Sikhs sing gurbani hymns  
**Puja path** – worship recitation  
**Pujari** – the person responsible for the enactment of rituals in temples  
**Puranmashi** – full-moon day of the lunar calendar  
**Rabab** – rebeck  
**Rahit** – the Sikh code of conduct  
**Rahit-nama** – historical manuals of the Sikh code of conduct

**Ragi** – a professional singer of *kirtan*  
**Ragi jatha** – an ensemble of professional singers of *kirtan*  
**Rumala** – the robes in which the Sikh scripture is wrapped  
**Sach** – truth  
**Sachkhand** – the abode of truth  
**Sahib** – a title used to denote respect  
**Sanchi** – volume, or separate parts of a book  
**Sangat** – the holy congregation  
**Sangrand** – the first day of the solar Vikrami month  
**Sant** – a person who knows the truth  
**Sant-sipahi** – the saint-soldier, which designates the ideal Sikh  
**Sardar** – chieftain, a title of respect to male Sikhs who follow the Sikh teaching and wear turbans  
**Sardarni** – a title of respect to female Sikhs who follow the Sikh teaching  
**Sarup** – the bodily form and appearance of the ten Sikh Gurus and the Sikh scripture  
**Sat** – true  
**Sat sangat** or **Sadh sangat** – the congregation of true people  
**Satguru** – the true guru  
**Satnam** – the true name  
**Sat Sri Akal** – “true is the respected eternal God”, the Sikh salutation  
**Sehra bandhna** – the ceremony of tying a chaplet over the groom’s eyes  
**Seva** – selfless service  
**Sevadar** – a person who performs seva, an attendant in the gurdwara  
**Shabad** – hymns, referring to hymns in Guru Granth Sahib  
**Shraddh** – ancestor worship  
**Shuddh** – pure  
**Sikh Rahit Maryada** – the present Sikh code of conduct since 1950  
**Simran sadhna** – practices of *simran*  
**Siropa** – a robe of honor  
**Sodhi** – a sub-caste of the Khatris  
**Tapasthan** – place of meditation  
**Takht** – throne or center of worldly authority  
**Tan** – the human body  
**Taviz** – Muslim amulets with Koran verses  
**Tikka** – vermillion mark placed on the forehead  
**Udasin** – detachment, used for followers of Shri Chand, the son of Guru Nanak  
**Vahiguru** – “the great Guru”, a name for God  
**Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki fateh** – “Hail to the Guru’s Khalsa, Hail to the Guru’s victory”, the Khalsa ovation  
**Viah** – marriage  
**Vidai** – the bride’s departure from her family after marriage  
**Vir-ras** – the “taste” or “flavour” of heroism



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GGS Guru Granth Sahib. Translations made from the Gurmukhi script to the English vernacular are based on Manmohan Singh's translation of 1996 (5<sup>th</sup> edition), published by the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee*, Amritsar.

### INTERVIEWS

Recorded and transcribed interviews with 35 laypersons, 38 gurdwara employees and 16 performers related to the gurdwaras of Varanasi, as well as miscellaneous interviews with laypersons and representatives of other religious institutions between October 1999 and April 2001. The identities of all interviewees are here kept anonymous because of ethical considerations. Field notes, diaries, and transcriptions of recorded interviews (1999: tape 1, 6 – 9, 11 – 12, 16, 19 – 20, 24 – 26, 32, 34 – 37, 40 – 42; 2000: tape 1 – 3, 6 – 29, 31 – 39, 54 – 55; 2001: tape 44 – 54, 56 – 60, 62 – 63, 65 – 67, 69 – 70, 72 – 95, 97 – 106) are available with the author.

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